

fantastic

S C I E N C E - F I C T I O N

AUGUST

35¢



GUARDIAN
OF THE CRYSTAL GATE

By
Robert Silverberg

THEY WRITE...

ROBERT SILVERBERG



I can't write the usual sort of autobiography because I haven't had the usual sort of writer's life; instead of working at filling stations and roadside cafes and such places, I went into writing after leaving college and thus can't list a long string of occupations.

Like so many other professionals from Ray Palmer through Bradbury to Algis Budrys, I served my apprenticeship in the fan ranks first, and for a number

of years was active in the world of fans and fanzines while learning my craft. (In fact, my first pro sale, to a now defunct magazine, was an article about fandom.)

I sold my first story in 1953, after four solid years of trying, to *Nebula*, a Scottish s-f magazine. Sales to the American markets followed, slowly at first, then picking up with gratifying rapidity. At first the checks would show up about three months apart; after a while, they started coming more often, and I'm now happily employed as a full-time writer, specializing in science fiction. (I've sold westerns, sports, and detective stories too, but s-f is the type of fiction I most enjoy doing.)

My first novel, *Revolt on Alpha C*, was published last summer. I've recently completed a second, with another on the horizon for '57. Readers of *Amazing* and *Fantastic* first saw my name on a short story in last January's *Amazing*, but I hope to be appearing in these magazines more often in the future.

Like Isaac Asinof, I got my college education at Columbia, and like Isaac I began writing while still an undergraduate. (The resemblance ends there.) I'll be getting married, shortly, to a lovely and intelligent young lady who won't read any s-f but mine. *That* ought to prove how smart she is!

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CONTENTS

GUARDIAN OF THE CRYSTAL GATE By Robert Silverberg.....	6
THE LONG FORGOTTEN By Henry Still.....	32
O' CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN By Ivar Jorgensen	46
GROWING PAINS By Robert Arnette.....	56
THE SLOW AND THE DEAD By Robert Randall.....	72
REVOLT OF THE SYNTHETICS By Ralph Burke.....	105

DEPARTMENTS

LOW MAN ON THE ASTEROID By The Editor.....	4
ACCORDING TO YOU . . . By The Readers	119



Cover: EDWARD VALIGURSKY

Editor
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BY THE EDITOR

IN DEFENSE OF DAY-DREAMERS

We seem to be somewhat partial to Kipling because we're forever quoting the old boy, but the fact is so many of his stirring lines hit some particular nail square on the head. The one we're thinking of at the moment is from his great inspirational standby, titled IF—no connection with the current science-fiction magazine of the same name. The line goes: "If you can dream and not make dreams your master," and the old expert adds: "If you can think and not make thoughts your aim."

The second line is good, too, but let's dwell on the first one: *If you can dream and not make dreams your master.* Certainly you can remember the petulant voices out of your past—your mother or grandmother: "For heaven's sake, child! Will you get that glassy look out of your eyes and pay some attention to what I'm saying?" If you are an adult, that is, you have those memories. If you are very young such complaints are a part of your everyday life.

But let's face it. What's wrong with dreaming. Day dreams are an integral part of youth. A boy who hasn't ridden a Mississippi river raft with Huckleberry Finn—who has not faced John Silver's drunken buckos aboard the good ship *Hispaniola*, has not really lived. And any little girl who has not been awakened by the Prince's kiss from the fairy couch of the Sleeping Beauty, has missed a moment of pure romance that can never be recaptured.

But day-dreaming is not confined to children. Adults who would react with indignation at being so accused, day-dream continuously. Did you ever get sore at your boss and say to yourself: Man, I'd like to hold fifty-one percent of the stock in this company! Then I'd walk in and tell that chowderhead

(Concluded on page 130)

In Your Mind's Eye

The Secret of MENTAL CREATING

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Guardian of the Crystal Gate



The girl beckoned seductively,



luring him into unknown perils.

GUARDIAN OF THE CRYSTAL GATE

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

Men were vanishing through the deadly gateway of crystal, lured to their destruction by the sensuous body of a woman born for but one reason—to tempt men. Could the riddle be solved with no other clue but a handful of flashing diamonds?

IT BEGAN quietly. I walked in, sat down, and the Chief, in a quick motion, dropped a diamond in front of me on his desk.

I stared blankly at the jewel. It was healthy-sized, emerald-cut, blue-white. I looked up at him.

"So?"

"Take a close look at it, Les." He shoved it across the desk at me with his stubby fingers. I reached out, picked up the diamond—it felt cool to touch—and examined it.

Right in the heart of the gem was a thin brown area of clouding, marring the otherwise flawless diamond. I nodded. "It looks—like a burnt-out fuse," I said, puzzled.

The Chief nodded solemnly. "Exactly." He opened a desk

drawer and reached in, and grasped what looked like a whole handful of other diamonds. "Here," he said. "Enjoy yourself." He sent them sliding out on the desk; they rolled across the shiny marbled desktop. Some went skittering to the floor, others dropped into my lap, others spread out in a gleaming array in front of me. There must have been forty of them.

The Chief's eye met mine. "Each one of those diamonds," he said, "represents one dead man."

I coughed. I've had some funny cases since joining the Bureau, but this was the fanciest hook the Chief had used yet. I started scooping up the diamonds that had fallen to the floor. They were of all sizes, all cuts—a million dol-

lars' worth, maybe. More, maybe.

"Don't bother," the Chief said. "I'll have the charwoman pick them up when I leave. They're not worth anything, you know."

"Not worth anything?" I looked at the ones I had in my hand. Each was marred by the same strange brown imperfection, that fuse blowout. I closed my hand, feeling them grind together.

"Not a cent. For one thing, they're all flawed, as you can easily see. For another, they're all synthetics. Paste, every one of them. Remarkably convincing paste, but paste all the same."

I leaned back in my chair, put my hands together, and said, "Okay. I'm hooked. Put the job on the line for me, will you?" I was thinking, *This is the screwiest one yet. And I've had some corkers.*

"Here's the pitch, Les." He drew out a long sheet of crisp onionskin paper, and handed it to me. Neatly typed on it was a list of names and addresses. I ran down the list quickly without hitting any familiar ones.

"Well? Who are they?"

"They're missing persons, Les. They've all disappeared in this city between—ah—"

He took the list back—"27 November, 2261, and 11 February of this year. The list totals sixty-six names. And those are just the ones we know about."

"And the diamonds?"

"That's where this Bureau comes in," he said. "They only send us the screwy ones, as you've no doubt discovered by now. In each disappearance case listed on this sheet, one of those burnt-out diamonds was found in the room the missing man was last seen in. In every case."

I frowned and scratched an ear reflectively. "You say there's a tie-in with the diamonds, Chief?"

He nodded. "One burnt-out diamond in exchange for one man. It's a recurrent pattern of correlation. Those men are disappearing and those diamonds have something to do with it. We don't know what."

"And you want me to find out, eh?"

"That's only part of it." He moistened his lips. "Suppose I tell you where you fit into the picture, and let you decide what you want to do yourself. I can't force you, you know."

"I haven't turned down a case since I've been with the Bureau," I reminded him.

"Good." He stood up. "Let's see you keep that record in-

tact, then. Because we've just found one of these diamonds that *isn't* burnt out!"

The vault swung open, and the Chief led the way in. He was a short, blocky little man, hardly impressive-looking at all. But he knew his job perfectly—and his job was to maneuver muscleheaded underlings like myself into positions where they were just about committed to risk life and limb for the good old Bureau without knowing quite what they were going into.

I was in that uncomfortable position now. It wasn't going to be easy explaining this gambit to Peg, either, I thought.

He crossed the shadowy floor to an inner safe, deftly dialed the combination, and let the door come creaking open. He drew out a little lead box.

"Here it is," he said.

I reached for it in my usual melon-headed manner but he drew it back quickly out of my grasp. "Easy," he said. "This thing is dangerous." Slowly, he lifted the top of the box just a crack.

A pure, silvery beam of brightness shot out and lit up the whole room.

"It must be a beauty," I said.

"It is. Diamonds like these have lured sixty-six men to what we assume is their death, in the last three months. This particular one hasn't had a chance to go into action yet."

I took the box from him. It was hard to resist the temptation of lifting the top and staring at that wonderful diamond again, but I managed. I wanted to find out all the angles of the job before I got involved.

"One of our cleaning-women found the stone yesterday, right after I left. She called me at home. At first I thought it was one of the ones I was working with—one of the burnt-out ones. But from the way she described it, I knew it was something special. I had her box it this way at once. No one's seen it yet, except in little peeks like the one I just gave you."

He tapped the box. "I'll tell you my theory," he said, "and you can take it from there." His voice ricocheted around unpleasantly in the silent vault. "This diamond is *bait*, in some way. The things have been appearing, and men have been doing something with them; I don't know what. But the diamonds are directly connected with this wave of disappearances."

I started to object, but he checked me.

"Okay, Les. I know it sounds crazy. How would you like to prove otherwise?"

"You're a sneaky one," I told him, grinning. Then the grin vanished as I stared at the little lead box. "I'll do it," I said. "But make sure that Peg gets the pension, will you?"

"Don't worry," he said, matching my grin. "She'll get every penny she deserves—after I get through grabbing, of course." He started to lead the way out of the vault. I followed and he closed the door behind me.

"You take that diamond along with you," he said, indicating the box. "Play with it. Do anything you like. But come back with a solution to this vanishing business. Here," he said. "Take a few of these burnt-out ones too."

"Yeah. Peg might like them," I said. "They'll look swell with black."

I turned to go. As I reached the door, something occurred to me. I paused.

"Say—I think I've found a hole in your theory. How come that charwoman didn't disappear when she found the diamond?"

He smiled. "Take another look at the list I gave you, Les.

All the names on it are *men's* names. Whatever this is, it doesn't affect women at all."

"Hmm. Thought I had you there, for a minute."

"You ought to know better than that, Les."

Peg didn't like the idea one little bit.

I called her right after I left the Bureau office, and told her the chief had a new project for me. I didn't tell her what it was, but from the tone of my voice she must have guessed it was something risky.

I saw her face in the screen go tight, with the mouth pulled up in the little frown she's so fond of making every time I get stuck into another of the Bureau's weirdies.

"Les, what is it this time?"

"Can't tell you over the phone," I said, in mock accents of melodrama. "But it's a doozie, that's for sure." I fingered the leaden box in my pocket.

"I'll come over after work," she said. "Les, don't let that man get you doing impossible things again."

"Don't worry, baby. This new business won't take any time at all," I lied. "And the Bureau pays its help well. See you later, doll."

"Right." I broke the con-

nection and watched her anxious face dissolve into a swirl of rainbow colors and trickle off the viewer, leaving the screen looking a dirty grey. I stared at the dead screen for a couple of minutes, and then got up.

I was worried too. The Bureau—that's its only name, just plain The Bureau—was formed a while back, specifically to handle screwball things like this one. In a world as overpopulated and complex as ours is, you need a force like the Bureau — silent, anonymous, out of the limelight. We take care of the odd-ball things, the things we'd prefer the populace didn't get to hear about.

Like this one. Like this business of people pushing off into thin air, leaving burnt-out diamonds behind. The only people on Earth who could have even a remote chance of worming some sanity out of that one were—us. More precisely, me.

I stopped at a corner tavern and had a little fortification before going home. The barkeep was an inquisitive type, and I rambled on and on about some fictitious business problems of mine, inventing a whole sad story about a lumber warehouse and my shady partner. I didn't dare talk

about my real business, of course, but it felt good to be able to unload some kind of trouble even if it was phoney.

Then I caught a quick coper and headed for home. I got out at the depot and walked, feeling the leaden box tapping ominously against my thigh every step of the way. Peg was there when I came in.

"You made it pretty quick," I said, surprised. "Seems to me you don't get out of work till four, and it's only three-thirty now."

"We got let off early today, Les. Holiday." She looked up at me, with strain and worry evident on her face, and ran nervous fingers through her close-cut red hair. "I came right over."

I went to the cabinet and poured two stiff ones.

"Here's to the Chief," I said. "And to the Bureau."

She shook her head. "Don't make jokes, Les. Drink to anyone else, but not to the Bureau. Why don't you drink to us?"

"What's wrong, Peg? The Bureau is what's going to keep us going, doll. The salary I get from them—"

"—will be just adequate to get you the finest tombstone available, as soon as he gives you a job you can't handle."

She stared up at me. Her eyes were cold and sharp from anger, but I could also see the beginnings of two tears in them. I kissed them away, and felt her relax. I sat down and pulled out the handful of burnt-out diamonds.

"Here," I said. "You can make earrings out of them."

"Les! Where did these—"

I told her the whole story, starting at the beginning. I always tell Peg exactly what each mission of mine is about. Doing that violates security regulations, I know, but I'm sure of Peg. Absolutely sure. When I tell her something, it's like telling myself; it doesn't get any further. Which is why I was able to keep company with her, with the eventual idea of marrying her. In the Bureau, you don't think of getting married unless you can find a woman who can keep her mouth shut. Peg could.

"You mean these diamonds are instrumental in the disappearances?" she asked, wonderingly.

I nodded. "That's what we think. And I have one other little exhibit for you." Slowly I drew out the lead box and opened it, only a crack, and let a single beam of radiance escape before slamming it shut again.

She gasped in awe. "That's *beautiful!* But how—?"

"That's where my job begins," I said. "That diamond is an unused specimen, one that hasn't functioned yet."

"Just how do *you* fit into this?" she asked suspiciously.

I stood up. "I'll find out soon enough. I'm going to go into the next room," I said, "and see how this diamond works. And then I'm going to go wherever it takes me, and worry about getting back after I get there."

The words fell so easily from my mouth that it seemed as if that had actually been my plan all along. Really, it hadn't; I didn't have any idea where I was going to begin this case, but certainly that wasn't any way to go about it.

But as I spoke the words, I saw that that was what I had to do. That was the way the Bureau worked. Go straight to the heart of the matter, and worry about the consequences to yourself later.

"Les—" Peg began, and then knocked it off. She knew it wouldn't do her any good to complain, and she didn't try. I loved her for it. I knew she didn't like my job, and I knew she'd give anything to have me go into some sane, safe industry—like jetcar racing, or something, I suppose—but

at least she kept her mouth shut once I got going on a project.

"You wait here," I told her. "Fix a couple of drinks for us. I'm going to adjoin to the next room and play around with this piece of glitter for a while."

"Be careful," she urged.

"I always am," I said. I gave her a kiss, and as I felt her soft, responsive lips against mine I wondered just where in hell that diamond was going to lead me. I didn't want to get too far from Peg, I thought suddenly.

Then I broke away, scooped up the lead box, and went into my den, closing the door behind me.

I sat down at the desk and spread the burnt-out diamonds in a little semi-circle around the box. The room was cold, and I was shivering a little—and not just from the draft, either.

I turned on my desk light and sat there for a while, staring at the glistening row of gems, staring at the odd little brown cloud disfiguring each one.

Then, slowly, I reached for the box.

Sixty-six men, for a reason I didn't understand, had disappeared. The diamonds had

something to do with it. I didn't know what. But I had an overriding feeling that I was slated to be Number Sixty-Seven.

It's a job, I thought. *It's my job*. And there was only one way to do it. My fingers quivered a little, just a little, as I started to open the box.

Brightness began to stream from it as soon as the lid was lifted, and I felt a bead of sweat break out on my forehead and go trickling down back of my ear. With perhaps too much caution, I lifted the lid clear back and lay bare the diamond nestling within, like a pearl inside an oyster.

I had never seen anything so lovely in my life. It was emerald-cut, neat and streamlined, with uncanny brilliance lurking in its smooth facets. It was small, but perfect, symmetrical and clear. It looked like a tiny spark of cold, blue-white fire.

Then I looked closer.

There was something in the heart of the diamond—not the familiar brown flaw of the others, but something of a different color, something moving and flickering. Before my eyes, it changed and grew.

And I saw what it was. It was the form of a girl—a woman, rather, a voluptuous, writhing nude form in the

center of the gem. Her hair was a lustrous blue-black, her eyes a piercing ebony. She was gesturing to me, holding out her hands, incredibly beckoning from within the heart of the diamond.

I felt my legs go limp. She was growing larger, coming closer, holding out her arms, beckoning, calling—

She seemed to fill the room. The diamond grew to gigantic size, and my brain whirled and bobbed in dizzy circles. I sensed the overpowering, wordless call.

Then I heard the door open and close behind me, and I heard Peg's anguished scream: "*Les!*"

There was the sound of footsteps running toward me, but I didn't turn. I felt Peg's arms around my shoulder. She seemed to be holding me back.

I tore loose. The girl from the diamond was calling to me, and I felt inexorably drawn. "*Les!*" I heard Peg call again, and then again, more faintly. Her voice seemed to fade away, and the diamond grew, and grew, and seemed to take up the entire universe. And within it, now life size, was that girl.

I went to her.

There was greyness, and void.

I found myself alone. Somewhere.

I was flat on my face, breathing in a strange, warm, alien air, lying stretched out with my nose buried in a thick carpet of blue-green moss. I stumbled to my feet and looked around, still hearing the echoes of Peg's fading cries resounding in my head.

Strange twittering noises sounded from above. Still too stunned to do much besides react to direct stimuli, I glanced up and saw a vicious-looking black-feathered bird with gleaming red talons leap from one tree to another.

Once I recovered my mental equilibrium, my first feeling was one of bitter, irrational anger—anger at the Chief for having let me fall into this job, anger at Peg for not forcing me to turn down the assignment, anger at myself for letting that diamond suck me into its field.

I was Number Sixty-Seven, all right. Les Hayden, vanished man. I could imagine Peg's terror-stricken face as she saw me disappear before her eyes and then picked up a burnt-out diamond.

Wherever those sixty-six guys had gone, I had followed. I looked around again. I had landed on some alien world, evidently, and I took the re-

alization a lot more calmly than I should have. I was pretty blase, as a matter of fact.

It *could* have been the Congo, of course, or the Amazon basin—but that wasn't too probable. For one thing, most of the places like that on Earth are pretty well civilized-looking by now. For another, no place, not even the Amazon, had birds like the ones that were flitting through the trees here. No place.

After the anger had washed through me, I calmed down a little. I leaned against one of the gigantic trees and groped for a clue, something to pick on as a starting point for the investigation I was about to conduct, the investigation that would clear things up. I was here on *business*.

I was in the middle of a vast jungle. The air was warm and moist, and clinging vines dangled down from the great trees. There didn't seem to be any other animal life, except for the myriad infernal birds.

Overhead, behind the curtain of vines, I could see the sun streaming down. It wasn't the familiar yellow light of Sol, either; the sun here was small, blue-white, and hot. I was sweating.

I stripped the jacket off and dangled it on the limb of a tree nearby, as a landmark,

and started to walk. Meantime pounding away in my head, was the vision of that impossible girl inside that impossibly lovely diamond. She was the bait that had trapped me.

I saw how the process worked. These diamonds appeared, and the unlucky recipient would stare at them, as I did, hypnotized into thinking there was a beckoning girl inside.

Then, through some magic, the trap snapped, and the unsuspecting victim got drawn in and carried across space to an uninhabited jungle planet.

Why? That was what I was going to find out—I hoped.

I started to walk, moving slowly through the thick haze of the steaming jungle. I heard the twitter of the birds, as a sort of chirping mockery from above, and now and then a little animal jumped out from behind the trees and scurried across my path. There wasn't a sign of another living being. I wondered if each victim got sent to a planet of his own; I hoped not. I was starting to feel terribly alone.

The jungle seemed endless, and that blue-white sun was getting hotter and hotter with each passing minute. I began

to think that I was moving in circles. One tree looked just like the next.

I walked for perhaps an hour, with the sweat pouring down my arms and shoulders and my legs getting wobbly from the strain and the heat. Floating in front of me all the time was the vision of Peg's face as she must have looked the moment I vanished.

I tried to picture the scene. Probably the first thing she'd do, when she got her balance back, would be to call the Bureau, get the Chief on the wire, and curse him black and blue. She wasn't a weak woman. She'd let him know in no uncertain terms what she thought of him for giving me this job, for sending me out to do and die for the Bureau.

But what would she do then? Where would she go? Would she forget me and find someone else? The thought chilled me. I kept slogging on through that infernal mud-hole of a planet, and there was nothing in sight but trees and more of them. After a while longer, I peeled off my shirt and wrapped it around the bole of a lanky sapling. Another landmark, I thought.

I was starting to get dreadfully depressed by the loneliness, by the dead, paradoxical emptiness of this fantastically

fertile world. There didn't seem to be any way out, any hope at all, and I was beginning to give in to my fears in a way I usually didn't do.

But just then a brown something came bounding out of the tangled nest of vines above me and struck me hard, knocking me to the ground. I hit the springy moss with a terrific impact, recoiled, and rolled over, feeling my lip swell where I'd split it.

I found myself facing what looked like an ape, about the size of a small, wiry man. The beast had two pairs of arms, two glowing, malicious eyes, and as nice a pair of saber teeth as you could find outside the Museum of Natural History. I scrambled a foot or two back, and lashed out with my feet.

I wasn't alone here any more, for sure.

The animal fought back furiously, wrapping its four arms around me, bringing its two razor-sharp teeth much too close to my throat to make me happy.

But I had just been waiting for something like this. I needed something concrete on which I could take out all my fear and rage and resentment, and I met the animal's attack firmly and came back on the

creature's own grounds, fighting with arms and legs and knees and anything else handy. Overhead, I heard the chattering of the birds grow to a tumultuous frenzy.

I pounded away, smashed a fist into those two gleaming yellow sabers and felt them crack beneath my driving knuckles, felt the teeth give and break beneath the impact. A hot lancet of pain shot down my hand, but the animal gave a searing cry and jumped back.

I was on him immediately. All its attention was being given to the two broken teeth; its upper pair of hands was busy trying to stanch the flow of bright blood from its mouth, and the other two were waving in feeble circles. I came down hard with my feet, once, twice, a third time, and then the arms stopped waving.

I walked away, looking cautiously around to see if the animal had any relatives in the neighborhood. Suddenly, the empty, lonely jungle seemed overcrowded; behind every spreading leaf there might be another of these saber-toothed horrors. Breathing hard, feeling the blood dripping from my cut knuckles, I started to edge on through the jungle.

My face was set in a grim mask. It looked like life on this planet was going to be a permanent struggle for survival, judging from my first taste of its wildlife—with no way out. I thought of Peg, back on Earth, and wondered what she was doing, what she was thinking of.

I kept going, determined to keep moving at all costs, determined to beat this world and find my way back to Earth. The fight had set my hormones rolling, apparently; the outpour of adrenalin was just what I needed to galvanize me out of the fit of depression I had been sinking into. Now I was fully alive, wide awake, and wanting out desperately.

Then I glanced up. There seemed to be a fire up ahead; white, brilliant light was streaming through the jungle, illuminating the dark recesses around me. I drew my breath. If it really was fire, that meant people—savages, perhaps? I advanced cautiously, dying a dozen times whenever I scrunched down on a twig.

After about fifty yards, the path swivelled abruptly at a right-angle bend, and I found myself suddenly out of the jungle. I emerged from the thickly-packed trees and saw

what was causing all the light. I whistled slowly.

It wasn't a fire. It was a *diamond*, planted smack in the middle of a wide treeless clearing—the biggest diamond anyone ever dreamed of, looming ten feet off the ground, lying there like a gigantic chunk of frozen flame. It was cut with a million facets from which the bright sunlight glinted fiercely. All around it, the trees had been levelled to the ground. The great gem stood all alone, in solitary majesty.

Not quite alone, though. For as I stood there, at the edge of the jungle, staring in open-mouthed astonishment, I saw a figure come up over the top of the diamond, poise for a moment on the narrow facet at the very peak, and then leap lightly to the ground.

It was the girl—the girl whose beckoning arms had enticed me into this nightmare in the first place. She was coming toward me.

The girl in the diamond had been nude, but I guess that was only part of the bait. This girl was clad, though what she was wearing took care of the legal minimum and not much more. Otherwise, it was the same girl, radiant with an incredible sort of magnetism. In person, she had the same kind

of effect that the image in the diamond had had.

I stood there, dazzled.

"I've been waiting for you," she said. Her voice was low and throbbing, with just the merest echo of something alien and strange about it. "It has been so long since I called, and you did not come."

I just stared at her. Up till this moment I had thought Peg was about as sexy as a girl could be, as far as I was concerned. But I was wrong. This item made Peg look almost like an old washboard by comparison.

She was all curves, but with a rippling strength underneath that was a joy to see. Her hair was deep blue-black, with glossy undertones, and her eyes were deep and compelling.

"My name is Sharane," she said softly. "I have been waiting for you."

The sunlight kept bouncing down off that colossal diamond, and Sharane stood there, brilliant in its reflected light. Her skin seemed to glow, it was so radiant. She took another step toward me, arms outstretched.

I moved back a step. So much glamor in one body frightened me. The last time I had listened to this girl's call,

it had drawn me across space and brought me to this planet. Devil only knew what might happen this time.

Besides, there was Peg. So I backed off.

"What do you want?" I demanded. "Why have I been brought here? Where is this place?"

"What does it matter?" Sharane asked lightly, and from the tone of her voice I started to wonder myself. "Come here," she urged.

I started to laugh, I'm afraid. It was all so preposterous, this whole business of diamonds that make people shoot off to some world in space, and this lynx-eyed temptress coming toward me—I dissolved in near-hysterical laughter.

But I was laughing out of the other side of my face a moment later, when Sharane stepped close to me and I felt her warmth near me. She looked up at me, with the same expression on her face that the image in the diamond had had. I was defenseless.

Peg, I thought. Peg, help me!

She put her arms around me, and I started to pull back and then stopped. I couldn't. She came close, enfolded herself around me.

Somehow at that moment

the distant Peg seemed pretty pale and tawdry next to Sharane. I forgot her. I forgot Peg, I forgot the Chief, the Bureau, Earth—I forgot everything, except Sharane and the blindingly brilliant diamond in front of me.

She drew my head down, and our lips met. The contact was warm, tingling—

Then I felt myself grow rigid, as if I were rooted to the ground.

Sharane pulled her lips away, and took a step back. She looked at me, strangely, half triumphantly and half sadly. I saw her sigh, saw her breasts rise and fall.

I strained to move, and couldn't. I was frozen!

"Sharane!"

"I am sorry," she said. Her musical voice seemed to be modulated into a minor key, as if she *were* really sorry. "This is the way things must be."

And then she lifted me up, slung my stiffened form over her shoulder as easily as if I were an empty sack, and started walking away!

I struggled impotently against the strange paralysis that had overcome me, and cursed bitterly. A second time, Sharane had trapped me! Once, when she called from

the depths of the crystal; now, when she betrayed me with a kiss.

I rolled my eyes in anguish, but that was as close as I could come to motion. Sharane carried me lightly, easily, around to the other side of the gigantic diamond. "You will have friends here," she said softly.

I looked around, and blinked in surprise. For half a dozen other Earthmen lay, similarly frozen, behind the great diamond.

Sharane very carefully laid me down in their midst, and left me.

She had put me between two other frozen prisoners. Further away, I saw four more. All six were gripped by the same strange force that held me.

"Greetings, friend," I heard the man on my left say. "The name is Caldwell—Frederic Caldwell. What's yours?" It was almost as if we were meeting in a cafeteria, he was so casual.

"Les Hayden," I said.

"My name is Strauss," said the one on my right. "Ed Strauss. Glad to meet you, Hayden. Join our merry band."

Strauss—Caldwell—those were two of the names on that list of sixty-six vanishers.

And I'm *Sixty-Seven*. *Welcome to the fold*, I thought.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"Ten days," said Strauss.

"A week," Caldwell said. "But you'd never know it. When you're frozen like this, you don't need food or anything. You're out of circulation, period. You just lie here, waiting for the next sucker to be deposited in the vault."

"Yeah," said Strauss. "There were about forty guys here when I came, but one day a ship came down and some huge *things* packed most of them up. That made things pretty quiet for a while. We've just been lying here, those of us that are left. Every once in a while Sharane catches someone new."

"Did both of you get snagged the same way?"

"I found a diamond on my desk one day," said Caldwell. "Came out of nowhere. I started staring at it—and I guess you know the rest of the story."

"It's Sharane's kiss that does it," Strauss said. "I think it sets up some kind of force field that freezes us. And we stay here, and wait for the alien ship to come pick us up and take us away."

"To the slaughterhouse," said Caldwell dully.

I pushed and struggled, but it was to no avail. I was efficiently straitjacketed. Above me, the big diamond stared coldly out, its radiant brilliance seeming to mock us.

Caldwell and Strauss had been trapped the same way I had—by the beckoning diamond. I wondered how many more Sharane would catch, would draw across space to this strange planet. And I wondered *why*? Who was this strange woman, what power did she have, why was she doing what she did? What motivated her?

I didn't know. And it didn't look like I was ever going to find out.

All I knew was I was caught, and there didn't seem to be any way out. But I wasn't going to give up. I could still keep on hoping.

We lay there for hours, talking occasionally, more often remaining silent, staring up at the cloudless sky. I could see how the days would roll by, in empty, mindless waiting, until the mysterious ship returned for its next load of Earthmen.

By dint of much eyeball-rolling, I was able to make out what my two companions looked like. Strauss was balding, sandy-haired, middle

aged, Caldwell much younger, dynamic-looking.

There wasn't much we could say, and after a while conversation ceased entirely. We were so placed that I could see the giant diamond clearly, and I started to pass the time by staring at its peak, wondering how many carats the thing could weigh. Millions, no doubt.

Then I began searching the sky, waiting for the ship to come, the ship that would carry us off to our unknown next destination. After a while longer I grew tired, and closed my eyes. I slept, uneasily, and no doubt I would have been tossing and turning if only I could move at all.

I was awakened by the sound of Caldwell's deep, sharp voice exclaiming, "Look! Here comes a new one!"

Then Strauss commented, "And it's a girl!"

I struggled to get my eyes open and keep them that way, and swiveled them around, searching for the newcomer. And then I saw her.

She was emerging from the edge of the jungle. I saw her plainly, clad in sweater and tight-clinging khaki trousers; she had evidently had a rough time of it in the jungle, because her sweater was torn

and shredded and her hair was wildly disheveled. But she kept moving onward, her eyes wide in amazement at the sight of the diamond.

She was Peg.

I watched her almost dazedly as she made her way across the clearing. I knew she couldn't see me yet, but I could see her. It was Peg, all right. How, why she had come, I could only conjecture. But she was here, madly, unbelievably, and I was glad to see her.

"Where'd *she* come from?" Caldwell asked.

"I thought only men came through," said Strauss. "Maybe she's an accomplice of Sharane."

"No," I said. "I know her."

I tried to call to her, to attract her attention in some way. I didn't know where Sharane was.

"Peg!" I called. My voice was a hoarse croak, barely more than a whisper. I tried again. "Peg! Peg!"

The third time she heard me. I saw her mouth drop open as she turned slowly and saw us spread out on the ground, and then she started running joyfully toward us.

"Les! Oh, Les!" she called, from a hundred yards away. Her voice came across clearly, and at the moment it seemed

like the most wonderful sound I had ever heard.

I watched her as she ran, drinking in the sight of her—the smooth stride, the long, powerful legs, the bobbing red hair that fluttered up and down as she ran. And a hot burst of shame flooded my face as I remembered the kiss—Sharane's kiss.

Peg would forgive me though. I knew she would.

She kept running, running toward us—and then she stopped and recoiled back, as if she had struck a glass wall.

I saw her move a few paces and rub her nose as if she had bruised it. Then she stepped forward again, and, in perplexity, extended a hand in front of her. It stopped short at the same barrier.

She began to edge around in a wary semicircle, feeling in front of her, and everywhere it was the same. An invisible barrier, blocking us off from her. She wouldn't be able to reach us. Whoever had snared us really knew his business.

Tears of frustration came to her eyes, but she wiped them away and continued to search for some break in the barrier, while I shouted words of encouragement to her. It was a miracle that Peg was here at all, Peg whom I thought I'd

never see again, and I wanted desperately to be holding her tight.

She completed the circle around us, without finding any way in. I saw her kick the barrier viciously, saw her foot stop in mid-air as the invisible field rebuffed the blow.

And then, standing spell-bound, I saw Sharane come up behind her.

"*Watch it!*" I yelled, but there was no need of the warning. Peg turned, and the two women faced each other uneasily.

I felt torn apart when I saw the two of them together. Peg was a wonderful girl, wonderful to look at, wonderful to be with—but Sharane! Sharane was something different, something unearthly, something irresistible. No wonder she had trapped sixty-seven men so far. Sixty-seven, plus Peg—if Peg had been trapped.

The two women moved closer to each other, and then, incredibly, I heard Sharane say, in the same throaty, erotic voice she had used on me and on everyone else who had come through the crystal gateway, "I've been waiting for you."

Peg's sarcastic answer rang out sharp and clear. "I'll bet you have," she snapped.

"It has been so long since I

called, and you did not come," Sharane said caressingly.

My eyes popped. Was Sharane trying to make love to Peg? What kind of thing *was* Sharane, anyway?

"Let me through that barrier," Peg demanded.

Sharane made no answer, but merely moved closer. "My name is Sharane," she said. "I have been waiting for you."

Word for word, the same routine she'd given me! Only how did she expect it to work on Peg?

It didn't. Sharane moved even closer, reached out her arms, started to embrace Peg—

And Peg knocked her sprawling with an open-fisted blow.

Sharane went reeling back on the ground, but picked herself up with no apparent bruises, and returned to her strange task. She moved back to Peg, turning on all her siren charms.

It was incredible, unbelievable. But Peg wasn't to be tempted as easily as a mere man would be. As Sharane approached, Peg whipped out at her with another blow, and followed with a neat fist to the dark-haired woman's stomach.

Sharane backed up, and apparently caught on that she wasn't getting the usual reac-

tion from Peg. She charged in a mad flurry, failed to get much of a handhold on Peg's short-cut hair, and launched out in an attack of wild violence.

Peg parried most of the punches, but a stray fingernail got through the defense and raked down her cheek, leaving a long, bloody line, and one of Sharane's frantic blows landed in her mid-section, throwing her back gasping for breath.

I heard my own voice shouting encouragement, roaring as if I were at a prizefight. And, from around me, I heard the other men cheering Peg on too.

I had never seen two women fight, before. It was quite a sight.

Sharane had the upper hand for a few moments, forcing Peg back, and on the areas of flesh exposed where Peg's sweater had been torn in the jungle, I saw livid bruises starting to appear.

Then Peg regained the initiative, and with an outburst of kicks, punches, and slaps she drove Sharane back. Peg used every tactic in the book, and some that weren't—such as reaching out, seizing Sharane's lovely blue-black hair, and yanking.

Suddenly I saw Sharane break away out of a clinch and dash back, toward us, through the barrier. Peg followed on her heels, just a step behind.

Sharane must have dissolved the barrier she'd set up in order to let herself get through, but the maneuver turned out a flop, because Peg came right through with her. Sharane turned, glaring angrily at her when she saw the strategy had been negated, and set out in a run—straight for the giant diamond!

"Go get her, Peg!" I shouted, almost breathless from the strain of watching the women fight while I myself was unable to move a muscle.

Sharane was climbing the diamond, pulling herself up by grasping the sharp corners of the facets, hauling herself up over that great shining eye. And Peg was right behind her.

I watched as Peg started the ascent, slipping and sliding, cutting her hands on the keen edges. Sharane was at the top, balanced precariously on the uppermost facet. The sun was beating down hard, shooting blinding flashes of light slashing off the diamond into our eyes.

As Peg approached the top, Sharane stooped and pushed her off. She went sliding back down, catching hold half way

to the ground. I saw that she had ripped the leg of her slacks open, but she didn't appear to be cut herself. She dangled for a moment and then with dogged determination she climbed her way back to the top. My heart pounded as frantically as if I were taking part in the struggle myself.

Sharane kicked out viciously. I saw Peg start to lose her grip, begin to fall back—and then seize Sharane's flailing foot, and, holding on with an unbreakable grip, begin to haul herself to the top of the diamond!

She reached it at last, and the two of them stood here, rocking shakily back and forth in the narrow area, while the blazing sun burnt down fiercely on them, sending rivers of perspiration coursing down their bare flesh. They were locked in a double grip, shivering from exhaustion, neither one able to gain advantage over the other.

Then I saw Peg's muscles flex, and she began to bend Sharane back, back, until the other woman was almost doubled over. Suddenly Sharane's leg gave way, and she toppled; through some miracle, she landed on her back, still atop the diamond, and Peg pounced down on her. Peg

clamped her hands on Sharane's lovely throat, and started to squeeze.

Sharane's arms began to thresh wildly—and strangely, as we watched dumfounded, Sharane began to *change*! As Peg kept up the relentless pressure, Sharane's shape began to alter; arms became tentacles, skin thickened and became something else, changed color from radiant white to loathsome purple. Where there had been a lovely seductress a moment before lay a ghastly *thing*.

Peg jumped back, startled at the transformation; Sharane, or the thing that had been Sharane, lashed out with a tentacle, and Peg, still clinging to the other, toppled back and off the diamond, pinwheeling to the ground.

The Sharane-thing lost its balance, dropped off the other side. I saw Peg lying unconscious on the ground, watched in impotent horror as the alien being started to rise—

And suddenly I discovered I was free! My arm moved, my leg! Apparently the alien had needed all its power to fight Peg, and had been unable to spare the concentration needed to maintain our imprisonment.

I was up and running in an

instant, feeling strength ebb back into my stiff, cramped muscles. I leaped on the monster before it could rise, felt its strange, dry, alien odor, and then my hands were around its scaly throat. I looked down, searched for some trace of the loveliness that had once tempted me, and could find none. I saw a weird, terrifying face with glinting many-faceted eyes and a twisted, agonized mouth. I kept up the pressure.

I heard the creature's breath gasping out, and then I felt hands on my shoulders—Peg's, on one shoulder, and a man's hand, on the other.

I looked up and saw Strauss' pudgy face. "Don't kill the thing," he said. "Get up, and let's find out what's been going on."

"No," I said. But they pulled me off.

I stood up, and watched the alien writhing on the ground, struggling to recover its breath. A surge of hatred ran through me.

"What are you?" I demanded. "Where are we?"

"Give me some time," it said, barely able to speak—but I could still detect in its voice the same underlying hypnotic tone Sharane's voice had had. It was the only point the

thing had in common with the girl. "Let me recover. I mean no further harm."

"I don't trust it," I said uneasily.

"Why not wait?" asked Strauss. "It can't make any trouble for us now—obviously there has been some kind of emotional surrender or it can't take control of us. That must be how the girl was able to defeat it."

I nodded. "That sounds reasonable." I stared coldly down at the battered, suffering alien. "All right. Let's let it catch its breath, and we'll find out what's what."

I was glad, now, that they had pulled me off. Carried away the way I was, I would undoubtedly have throttled the creature—and the Chief would undoubtedly have throttled me for it when I got back—if I got back. For one thing, with the creature alive there was a chance we might find out what this was all about. For another, with the creature dead we might have no way of getting back to Earth.

So I stood back, letting the anger seep out of me, and turned to Peg.

She had come off on top in the fight, but she was pretty well battered. One of her lovely blue eyes had an even lovelier shiner, and she was

thoroughly scratched and bruised. Her sweater was just about ripped clean off her, and she was holding the tatters together self-consciously.

"How did *you* get here?" I asked.

She smiled, and through all the blood and bruises it still looked wonderful.

"I went to the Chief, after you—disappeared."

"Wish you hadn't," I said. "I didn't want him to know I was letting you in on anything."

"He doesn't know. All I did was ask him to tell me what kind of job you had been sent out on. After I told him what had happened to you, he explained."

"And then?"

"Then I requested that the next unused diamond that was found be turned over to me. He didn't want to, but finally he agreed to it."

I looked at the slowly twisting creature lying on the ground, and back to Peg. "So?"

"So another diamond materialized that night, and the Chief called me. I came and picked it up, and when I was alone I looked at it. There was that girl in it, calling to me." She made a face. "It was disgusting."

"And then you were drawn in?" I asked, remembering the way Sharane had trapped me.

"Of course not, silly. I didn't respond to that posturing girl at all, and so I couldn't be caught. But I *voluntarily* came through. I willed myself to be drawn in, and I was. I landed up in that jungle, and wandered out here when I saw the light of the diamond."

I nodded. "And then Sharane came after you with her song and dance. Since Sharane was actually an alien with no real idea of the difference between the human sexes, she—it—thought her act would work on you too. But it didn't."

I walked over to where the alien was, and Peg and the six freed captives followed me. Sharane—the Sharane-thing—was sitting up.

"Hurry," it said. "We must talk before the Llanar ship arrives, or there is great danger."

"Who are the Llanar?" I asked, surprised.

"My captors," said the alien. Its weird face was twisted into an expression of cosmic sadness.

"What do you mean, your captors?"

"The Llanar," Sharane said, "are a great race from out there." She gestured at the

sky. "They conquered my people, and they wish to enslave yours through us. They have placed me here, against my will, and shown me how to disguise myself as a human. All who were drawn by the diamond were powerless against me—except—"

She pointed to Peg.

I smiled. "The only thing as hard as a diamond is another diamond. The only thing that could resist Sharane's womanly wiles would be another woman. Those diamonds were set up to trap *men*—and when a woman came through, Sharane here didn't know what to do with her. She had never experienced a human woman."

"I have now," the alien said weakly. "I hope to never again."

"How does this trap work?" Caldwell asked.

"The great diamond here is the focus," Sharane said. "The smaller ones serve as transmitting poles, at the other end of the channel. We send them to Earth, and when men find them they are drawn in. I then tempt them to surrender themselves—and as soon as they do, I freeze them." The alien broke into the alien equivalent of a sob. "Then the Llanar come, and take them

away. They make them slaves, on their home worlds."

The alien sat up, and rubbed itself. "But you have won your freedom from me," it said. "You may return to your planet."

"And you?"

"I must sit here," the alien said. "I must continue to prey on Earth, or the Llanar will kill me."

"We'll close that damnable gateway, don't worry," muttered Caldwell, but I ignored him.

Suddenly all my hatred for Sharane had vanished. I saw the strange thing before me as a *person*, not a thing—a suffering, sensitive person. An alien, true, but very human under the to-me-grotesque exterior. In just those few minutes I learned a lesson: you don't have to have arms and legs and two blue eyes to be a human being.

I saw the whole picture now. Sharane's people were under the domination of still another alien race from deep in the galaxy—the dread Llanar. And the Llanar were forcing Sharane to operate this lonely trap on the edge of the universe, waiting like a spider to net the unfortunates who happened to find one of the treacherous diamonds she scattered.

"You can send us back to Earth?" I asked.

"Yes," Sharane said. "But—"

Then she looked upward, and I saw the sky darken. Coming down, straight above us, was a gleaming golden-hulled spaceship!

Suddenly Sharane came to life. "The Llanar!" she cried. "Run into the jungle—hide, or they'll carry you off! I'll stay out here and get rid of them."

Her form melted and coalesced weirdly, and once again I saw before me the woman-shape. She pointed toward the jungle, and I didn't waste any time arguing. I seized Peg's hand and we broke into a frantic trot, heading for the woods.

We got there breathless, and all six of the freed men came racing in right behind us. We squatted there, silently, watching the Llanar ship descend.

It came down in slow, graceful spirals, hovered overhead, finally settled to the ground—and the Llanar came out.

I won't try to describe them. They were huge, thick-bodied, and I still shudder when I think of what they looked like. They were hideous, hateful, fearsome creatures. I imag-

ined what a whole world of them would be like.

Three of them emerged from the ship, came out, walked up to Sharane. They stood around her, dwarfing her lovely body among them.

They talked for a long while; I heard the low, booming rumble of their voices come crackling over the ground to us. After an extensive discussion, they turned and left. Sharane stood alone.

I watched, quivering with revulsion, as they marched slowly back to their ship, got in, and a moment later a fiery jet-blast carried them aloft. We remained in the forest for a moment or two longer, waiting until the Llanar ship was completely out of sight. Then we dashed out.

Sharane was waiting for us at the base of the great diamond.

"They wanted to know where the new batch of captives was," she said. Her breast was heaving in obvious terror, and it was hard for me to remember, as I looked at her, that minutes before she had been a hideous alien being writhing on the ground. "I told them none had come through since their last pick-up."

"What did they say?"

"They were angry that no new slaves were on hand."

I looked at Peg in gratitude. "If it weren't for you, I'd be on my way in that ship."

"It's lucky I came through when I did, darling."

"It certainly is, Miss," said one of the men.

I turned to Sharane. "Can you send us back?"

"It is simple." She reached up, pulled eight diamonds—small ones—from nowhere, and handed one to each of us. "Concentrate," she said.

One by one, the men blinked out and vanished, until only Caldwell and Peg and myself were left. Caldwell looked at me.

"You know," he said, "if you destroy that big diamond, I think it'll close this hellish gateway forever. No one else on Earth will be trapped the way we were."

"I know," I said. "But I don't intend to do it."

His eyes blazed angrily. "Why not? Do you want the Llanar to carry off everyone? For all you know, you'd be a slave on some stinking planet now if your girl hadn't come."

"I'm leaving the gateway open so we can come back through. Someday we'll return, when we're ready—more of us, Sharane. And our

people and your people together will end the Llanar tyranny."

But a new job was beginning.

"I will be waiting for you," Sharane said.

"Go through," I said bluntly to Caldwell. He frowned in concentration and vanished, leaving just Peg and myself facing Sharane.

"I am glad you defeated me." Sharane told Peg. "It may mean the beginning of a long friendship between our peoples."

"Many friendships begin after a deadly battle." I turned to Peg. "Let's go through."

"All right. Goodbye, Sharane."

"Farewell." The alien turned and walked away, slowly, toward the jungle.

We watched her go, standing there, watching that lovely false woman-form glide smoothly away.

The Llanar were powerful, all right—but not so powerful that they couldn't be beaten. I took a last look at the gleaming diamond, and at Sharane's retreating form.

Then she was at the edge of the jungle, waving to us.

But I knew I'd be seeing her again, someday.

And when we do, the Llanar will tremble.

THE END

THE LONG FORGOTTEN

By HENRY STILL

What price the New Age of tomorrow if its glitter beclouds the soul while dazzling the eye? Is an era that repudiates the warmth and reverence of basic truths an age worth living in? Bill Rogers thought not.

THE elevator doors opened. Bill Rogers scanned the corridor stealthily, held his breath, and made a dash for it.

Under his coat, only partially hidden, were four short, heavy planks. They were oak. At least he thought they were oak. He'd have to consult an old encyclopedia to be sure.

The 75 feet to his apartment was the longest walk of his life, but none of the other apartment doors opened.

His door swished open and Bill stumbled inside. The boards were heavy. They slipped out of his grasp and clattered to the floor. He leaned them carefully against

the wall of the vestibule, then exhaled with relief. So far, so good.

"Is that you, Bill?"

"Yeah, honey, I'm home."

Bill removed his coat, shaking drops of moisture off the shoulders. He brushed the frizzy green wreath on the door and the plastic red Christmas bells jingled with a dull little thunk.

"What on earth was that crash?"

Marva Rogers appeared in the door to the living room, a cigaret dangling from her fingers.

"These," Bill said. He pointed to the short pieces of lum-



The glory of another day shone forth.

ber. Marva's eyes widened with surprise.

"What are they?"

"Boards. Wood. Real wood." He thumped one with a knuckle.

Marva's face paled visibly under the standard layers of makeup, then her eyes flashed fire.

"Bill Rogers! Are you out of your mind? That much wood costs a fortune. Only last year you said we couldn't afford those mahogany earrings I wanted so much."

Bill didn't answer, but a ball of stubborn muscle gathered along his jawbone.

"You couldn't save enough credit in five years to buy that much wood—" Marva stopped storming long enough for a worry tremor to move along her spine.

"It came from a tree," Bill said.

"Of course, it came from a tree! Any fool knows that. But I've never seen a tree. Neither have you. The only ones left are those big ones in California. And last week the Marx Jewelry Co. advertised they paid half a million for that walnut tree someone found in Iowa."

She waited for an explanation. Bill didn't offer one.

"Where are the children?"

he asked. Marva exhaled explosively in exasperation.

"I got a special permit for them to go up to the spire," she said. "It's snowing. They begged to see it."

"Better than sitting in front of that damn Santychute all day," Bill said.

Marva sighed wearily. "Don't start that over again."

"I'll start it whenever I feel like it," he barked. "I'm sick of the whole business. We get food through a hole in the wall. When I need a new suit, it comes from the same place. Then just before Christmas, they set up these Santychutes in every block and the kids sit around mooning in front of a metal trapdoor until Christmas morning, and then plop, out comes their sterile little packages, like a hen laying an egg."

"Bill!" Marva's nose wrinkled with distaste. "Must you use such—such smelly similes?"

"All right. A computer then. That's what it is. A computer decides what's best for us and sends it through a vacuum tube and dumps it in our lap. Once you could go to a store and choose what you wanted, but not anymore."

"There was a time when Santa Claus was a wonderful warm old man with white

whiskers and a red suit. It was wonderful believing he was real and it gave parents a chance to do something special and personal for their kids.

"Now that shiny metal thing sticks its snout through the wall and when the right hour comes, out pops the presents. The kids howl and fight to rip them open, and—that's all there is to Christmas."

"I know," Marva snapped. "You've told me a hundred times how Christmas used to be at home. I'm sick of hearing it. Now we have the Santychute. Why don't you let it go at that?"

She walked to the window and stared outside. A uniform glow of fluorescent and ultraviolet light bathed the inner court of the block-square quadrangle. They lived below the screen—the erg screen that kept out the weather, cleaned the smog, collected the rain and snow to trickle down into mammoth municipal reservoirs. Above the screen lived only the millionaires with their private purifying systems, their magnificent view of the city and the elements of nature.

"I wish I could see the snow, too," she said wistfully. Bill hurried across the room, put his arm around her shoulders.

"I know," he said bitterly.

"You could have it out there in the slums, beyond the screen — or someday you might have it when you're an old woman, when I work to the top of the credit system."

"If you ever do," she whispered. She moved absently to the chair and picked up Bill's coat to take it to the closet.

"Where did this come from?" she asked accusingly. Her fingers touched the damp spots around the collar. "Were you up in the snow?"

It was a bad slip. He couldn't tell her he'd been out to the Fringe, beyond the 12-mile-square commercial and apartment district.

"I—the office sent me up to Halloway's place," he explained lamely. "He was home with a cold and there were papers to be signed."

Marva apparently accepted it. At least there was no time to answer for they heard Bren and Hesti chattering outside in the corridor.

"My god, the wood!" Bill gasped. He dived into the vestibule, juggled the planks in his arms, and ran with them to the study.

When he came out, he locked the door behind him.

Bren, 5, and Hesti, 3, didn't notice. They were absorbed in the tri-D cartoons projected by the Santychute for the

Evening Christmas Happy Hour. A slogan gurgled gaily that only one more day remained before Christmas. Then some poppy-cock about how cheerful little elves were busy fabricating the sparkling chrome and plastic toys the youngsters could expect in their Santychute.

Bill snorted with disgust and wandered out to the kitchen. Marva poured water in the de-hy packages and shoved them in the radiation cube for dinner.

"It'll be ready in 10 minutes," she said mechanically, and then turned worriedly. "Where did you get the credit for the wood, Bill?"

He shifted uncomfortably and lit a cigaret. She moved behind him, caressed him lightly behind the ears. That usually worked in difficult times.

"Please tell me," she whispered. But his face still held the stubborn look.

"I can't—now," he said. "You'll know all about it in a day or so."

"All right," she said, "if you don't want to trust me—"

"I do trust you," he said angrily. "You trust *me* for a little while. I didn't spend our life savings."

Now, ask the other question, he thought.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to build something," he said quietly.

"Build something!"

"Yes, build something. Don't look so damned horrified. People used to do it, you know. I borrowed some tools from the old janitor down in the basement. He hasn't had material to work with in years, but he kept his tools in good shape."

"What—" Marva moistened her lips nervously. "What are you going to build?"

"That," he said firmly, "is a secret, too."

Marva knew it was useless to push him. But her mind seethed with concern. She tried to remember when Bill had his last psychprobe.

At dinner Bren and Hesti bubbled with the wonders of the snow and how they walked to the end of a long, deep-carpeted corridor and stared out over the city through a long, high window.

Marva listened hungrily, almost forgetting for the moment her worry about Bill and the wood.

"It must have been beautiful," she murmured.

"Oh, it was," Bren said excitedly. "Why don't you and Daddy go up?"

"They won't let us," Bill ex-

plained gently. "It's only the children—and because it's Christmas time."

Marva drew a pensive pattern on the table with her fingertip.

"It's been five years since I've been outside our sector. Do you realize that? Just because of their old rules. And the last time they let us go above the Screen was on our honeymoon. Remember Bill?"

A frustrated lump of rage soured in his throat.

"Yes, I remember. They control our lives more every year—just because there are so many people they can't have us moving around where we please anymore." He paused. "But you know what I'll do? One of these days, I'll get a permit and we'll fly to the end of the city."

"Bill!" Marva's eyes gleamed with delight, then dulled again. "That would be wonderful, but you could never get a permit like that."

She was right, of course. He said nothing more.

After dinner, when the children were in bed, he locked himself in the study. Through the door issued the rasping sound of a saw—which Marva had never heard before—and then a prolonged series of heavy hammer blows.

She slept uneasily. It was

long after midnight before Bill came to bed.

The next morning, after husbands went to work, Florence came over. She lived in the next door apartment and was the only person Marva considered a friend. Even that friendship was based on little more than mutual curiosity and envy.

They chattered over coffee while Bren and Hesti played sporadically or hovered around the Santychute.

"Tomorrow is Christmas!" the synthetic voice burred.

Marva sighed.

"I almost wish they were back in school. Somehow Christmas seems like such a waste of time, but I suppose it makes them happy for a while."

"It just bores me," Florence said. She and Harry had no children, nor did they wish for any. "All it does is just get people excited and rushing around, and I don't even remember what started the whole thing in the first place."

"I don't know either," Marva tried to remember. "I think it had something to do with religion."

"By the way," Florence said. "What was that terrible banging over here last night?"

Has Bill started beating you again?" She laughed thinly.

"Oh, no," Marva tried to sound casual. "He's making something in the study."

"My, my, Bill, the genius." Florence didn't try to hide the tone of malice. "What is it?"

"I don't know," Marva laughed. "He's keeping it a big, dark secret."

"Oh, I love secrets. But that hammering. What's he making it out of?"

"I don't know that, either," Marva lied.

"Well, it couldn't be plastic," Florence mused. "Most plastic breaks when you hit it. That's what everything is made of these days, isn't it? Harry said he heard something that sounded like a saw, but I don't know what he meant." Florence laughed again. "I told him we'd have to call the warden if you folks disturb the peace like that."

A small knife of fear caught painfully in Marva's throat. Bill's behavior was disturbing enough. It would be frightful to have the warden snooping around.

"I was just joking, honey," Florence covered her hand. "You folks don't bother us at all. I don't know what we'd do if we didn't have someone nice like you near us. It's so lonely

all day with Harry at work and nothing to do . . ."

Bren and Hesti raced into the kitchen and out again, howling a nonsense refrain about space rockets and Santychutes.

"Did you see televid this morning?" Florence asked when they were gone. "The most awful thing on the newscast."

Marva shook her head. Worrying about Bill, she had forgotten to turn it on.

"Well, there was this old man, one of the few craftsmen left in the whole city. He makes this splendid wood jewelry—has a place up above the erg screen. Well, he was murdered yesterday, just blasted apart. When the police went in, they found his pieces scattered all around the workshop. And whoever did it took a whole bunch of wood. The newsman said it was worth thousands of dollars."

The knife of fear became a long, evil sword, plunging into Marva's heart. All the vague worry and suspicion which Bill's behavior had stirred in her now coagulated into a spiked barb of terror.

"What's the matter, darling?" Florence asked. "You're pale as a subworker. Did I say something?"

"Oh no, no! It's just—the

thought of that poor old man and blood or anything like that almost makes me sick."

"I'm sorry, honey, honest I am. I forgot you were so sensitive. Why don't you lie down a bit and rest. I'll run along."

Florence paused at the door.

"Merry Christmas," she said, "and all that."

Marva didn't answer. She heard the door click shut. The small, sharp sound set in motion the horrible chain of evidence trapped in her mind against her husband.

First, the wood—the terribly expensive pieces of beautiful wood. Then the dampness of his coat collar, dampness that could have gotten there only if he had been above the erg screen in the snow—and the old man's workshop was above the screen. Bill had lied about his errand up there, he was so queer when he told her that. And adding to the damage was his secrecy, his refusal to tell her what he was making, and then locking himself in the study that way.

By the time five o'clock came, Marva near hysteria, was sure she would never see him again, that even now the police would know the horrible thing he had done.

But the door opened, and Bill came in.

She rushed into the vesti-

bule and kissed him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Thank goodness you're here!" she sobbed. "I was so afraid they had arrested you."

For once Bren and Hesti found something more fascinating than the Santychute. They stood wide-eyed inside the door, watching this strange emotional outburst.

"Hey, what gives?" Bill held her at arm's length. "Why the fireworks?"

"Didn't you see televid today?" she babbled. "They know about the old man. The police—"

"What old man?"

"The one who made jewelry and he's dead and the wood is stolen."

"Oh, that," Bill said. "Sure I heard it. Nasty thing to happen just before Christmas, but I guess he doesn't have a family or anything. There's no one but the police to worry about the thousand-dollar boards."

Marva's eyes widened with horror. All day she had nurtured a new fierce love for her man, a monumental decision to stand by him no matter what horrible thing he had done. He must have had a good reason. But now he lied, even to her. Her tongue was adhesive tape stuck to the roof of her mouth.

"Hey, wa-ait a minute," Bill

whispered. "You think I did—that?"

Marva nodded, trying to pull away from him, hideously afraid of him now.

"Of all the stupid idiocy!" he yelled. "You must love me a lot if you think I could do a thing like that."

Marva whimpered. His hands hurt her shoulders. She wrenched away and dashed into the kitchen, slamming the door behind her.

The living room was silent. Bren and Hesti sat in the middle of the rug, staring in wonder and fright.

"This is Christmas Eve," Bren said tentatively, "isn't it Dad?"

"What? Oh, yes, it's Christmas Eve, son." Bill sighed. "And I've still got work to do."

He went into the study and locked the door.

Through the insulation of double walls, Marva heard the horrible sound of hammering again. Each blow sent a shock of sickness and horror through her body. But she went about the mechanical task of fixing dinner, fed the children and put them to bed.

Her face was red and swollen from weeping when Bill emerged from the study, wiping his hands on a piece of cloth.

"Well, it's done," he said with grim satisfaction.

When the door opened, she almost expected him to appear with a new, horrible weapon to destroy her, the children, half the people in the block in an insane rage of destruction.

But Bill sat down and picked at a blister on his palm.

At nine o'clock the police came.

Marva answered the door, choked with terror when she saw the three men. Two wore blue uniforms; the other obviously was a detective. They pushed into the vestibule. Marva bit her lip to keep from screaming and backed away.

"Name's Branham, ma'am," the detective said, flashing a badge. "We've had a complaint. We'll just look around if you don't mind."

Bill appeared behind her.

"What's the trouble officer?"

The detective eyed him coldly.

"People next door complained. Said there's been a heavy hammering noise in here, other suspicious sounds."

"Oh that." Bill smiled. "I'm guilty all right." Marva caught her breath. "I've been building something in the study. Come on in, I'll show

you. Sorry if I caused a racket."

The officers waited while he unlocked the study door. Marva's trembling knees turned to paste and she sat down in a chair. From inside the study she could hear muttering voices. It seemed they were in there a long time. Then she heard Bill's voice, loud and angry.

"You're crazy!" he shouted. "I can prove where I was all day yesterday."

"You'll have a chance to do that, if you can." Branham's voice. "Come along now, or we'll have to use force."

Marva leaped to the door, just as the uniformed cops came out with Bill between them. Branham came behind, slammed the door and turned the key in the lock.

In his hand he held a sawed scrap of wood.

"Did you know about this, Mrs. Rogers?" he asked thinly.

She tried to answer, but her voice was only a whisper.

"I—I knew he had it. But I don't know where—"

"We think we know where," Branham said grimly. "You heard about old man Farnsworth?" She nodded. The detective turned to Bill.

"She have anything to do with this?"

Bill's eyes flashed with the steel of deep anger. His face was pale.

"Absolutely not," he said evenly. "This was entirely my own business."

"Well, we'll see," Branham said. "We're taking your husband down to headquarters, but for the time being we'll leave you here with the kids. There'll be a guard outside the door," he added pointedly, "and don't try to get in that room. A criminologist will be here in the morning to go over it."

Marva nodded dumbly. The uniformed officers started past her with Bill's arms imprisoned between them. A strangled cry of anguish escaped her throat. She reached out to touch him, but one of the policemen brushed her aside.

That was what touched off her deep well of maternal rage, she remembered later. But just then a black star of hate burst in her brain. The heavy ceramic lamp was there on the table beside the door. Its crazed black surface gleamed in the lamplight, offered itself as a weapon.

Before anyone could move, Marva grabbed the lamp and brought it crashing down on a cop's head. Pieces of shattered pottery tinkled to the floor in a little symphony of sound.

The officer uttered a queer grunt, sagged to his knees, and then slowly toppled over.

"Run, Bill!" she screamed. "I don't care what you did. Run!"

But Bill stood there, stupidly, his mouth sagging open. Branham whipped out an ugly little gun and held it trained at her heart. The other cop knelt beside his buddy, felt for the pulse.

Marva burst into a fit of hysterical sobbing. She buried her face in Bill's shirt front and cried and couldn't stop crying. He put his arms around her and patted her awkwardly.

"Why didn't you run?" she wept. "We need you and it's Christmas. You could have come back to be with us."

"It's all right," he said softly. "I didn't know you felt that way." He kissed her softly until she stopped crying. "It wouldn't have done any good. They would catch me anyway."

The policeman started to regain consciousness. He sat up slowly, touched the bloody knot of swelling in his hair.

"What'd you do that for?" he mumbled. "I was just doin' my job. I got a wife and kids, too."

"All right, let's go," Branham said coldly. He paused in-

side the door and turned to Marva.

"You get this straight, Mrs. Rogers. We're holding your husband on suspicion of murder. We're not playing games. And we may slap aiding and abetting and resistance charges on you. I think it would be nice if your kids have at least one parent with them on Christmas day."

"I'm sorry," she whispered as they took Bill out the door.

But she wasn't sorry, not a bit. She wished fiercely she had a gun. She could have driven them all out and she and Bill and the children could run away somewhere. But the spurt of adrenalin her glands had provided to drive home the attack was ebbing now. It left her weak and trembling. She huddled in a chair and cried, long and uncontrollably. Finally there was no more weeping left.

Sometime, much later, she looked at the clock. It was one a.m.

Hesti stirred uneasily in her bed and Marva took her to the bathroom. She was thankful, at least, that the children did not know what had happened—yet.

Once she wondered what terrible compulsion had driven her calm, quiet husband to commit murder and theft. But

a protective mechanism in her mind blanked out the chain of thought.

Later she was hungry and pushed the supply chute button. But when the food came, she could not eat.

Two a.m.

It's Christmas, she thought. "It's Christmas," she said aloud, the sound of her voice frightened now, alone in the deep silence of the room—alone in the huge sleeping beehive of humanity.

From somewhere she began to understand part of the terrible frustration that had motivated Bill to rebellion—the creeping paralysis of gigantic cities, gradually choking to death with people, so that you couldn't move anymore without someone detouring or stopping you. There was no open countryside of trees and grass and fields to see anymore. Nothing now but people and the stonesteel hives the government kept building to house them. Perhaps it would be better to live out in the Fringe, out there where the slum clearance projects hadn't reached yet, where the poor people huddled in the crumbling wrecks of individual homes that once had housed the elite suburban dwellers.

Three a.m.

Marva wandered through

the house, the pressure of terror and uncertainty squeezing her brain, a giant press forcing her brains into flat pulp to be returned to some hungry factory somewhere.

She stopped at the study door. She rattled the knob. She kicked the door, but it only hurt her toes.

And it roused the cop stationed in the corridor.

He burst in the door, gun drawn.

"What's going on in here?" he growled suspiciously. "Mr. Branham said you wasn't to touch that door."

"Oh, shut up and go back to sleep," she snapped. "The damn thing's locked."

The policeman sheepishly put away his gun and closed the door softly behind him.

Then Marva thought of the vidaphone. Frantically she dialed the police station, but received only the zigzag lines and a busy buzz.

Another hour.

Marva's nerves were screaming threads of fire lacing the surfaces of her body.

She tried the police station again. Still busy.

Then she heard the front door latch. That damn snoop cop again. Marva took off her shoe, hefted it by the toe and headed for the vestibule.

It wasn't the cop.

The man standing there was Bill Rogers.

"Oh!" she gasped. "You escaped."

He walked past her and sank wearily in an easy chair.

"No," he said. "They turned me loose." Marva's mouth fell open in astonishment. "I didn't kill the old man. I didn't steal his wood. Are you disappointed?"

She sank beside him, held his head against her breast.

"No, no, no! I'm not disappointed." She kissed him hungrily. "But please tell me now, where did you get it?"

Bill sighed.

"I should have told you, I suppose. But it happened a long time ago, before we were married. I was working out in the Fringe on a slum clearance job. I went in to inspect this old factory. It was a wreck, but in the middle there was an open air shaft that went down to the ground.

"The roof was caved in and a little sunlight came through. And there was a little tree growing. That's fifteen years ago. I bought that land, just the air shaft. It was silly, I suppose, and I never told you after we were married because you'd think it was a waste of credits."

Marva kissed him, but he went on talking.

"The tree grew up—not very big, but big enough. Last summer I found an old guy to cut it for me and he sawed out those pieces of lumber. I thought once I'd sell them, and then decided to hell with it—for just once in my life I wanted to make something with my own hands. I showed the cops the tree stump and the old guy verified my story. So they turned me loose."

"And what did you make, there in the study?" Marva asked breathlessly.

Bill grinned and kissed her on the point of the nose.

"That's still a secret until the kids wake up."

Just then a strident clanging of bells broke the stillness and the Santychute in the corner burst out with a raucous medley of Christmas carols.

"Merry Christmas!" the mechanical voice shouted. "Merry Christmas! Everybody up!"

Bren and Hesti raced out of the bedroom. Bursting with excitement, they watched a kaleidoscope of colors smear in profusion across the Santychute door.

Then it opened, slowly, slowly, and out popped a pair of gaily wrapped packages.

In a twinkling of an eye

the wrappings were ripped off. Bren had a constructor set to build all the atomic combinations in the universe. Hesti had a grotesque mechanical doll that danced the Spacemug Hug and sang "Reep Deep a-Leep."

Five minutes later the youngsters were tired of the gaudy gadgets and wishing for something else.

Bill stood quiet, a far-away look in his eyes. Then he said, "It occurred to me that maybe the real meaning of Christmas has been forgotten."

There was something in the way he spoke—or perhaps in the way he crossed the room—that made Marva and the kids glance at each other.

Then Bill opened the door.

There was silence. Then the kids moved forward and through the doorway. Marva and Bill followed. For a long time no word was spoken. Then, "What is it, Dad?" But with more than curiosity in the question. An awe. Almost a reverence.

"Something that was a part of Christmas long ago. Before—" Bill's eyes remained vague. "—Well, before things changed, Christmas was different. I think it meant more. This is a manger with the Christ child and his mother and the wise men who came

bearing gifts. You see, that was how Christmas started—when Christ was born in a manger in Bethlehem."

"A manger?"

"A place where animals stayed—where they put the hay."

The kids didn't ask what kind of animals or what hay was. They stood looking at the manger and there was no rush to fight over it or take it apart. They dropped to the floor and sat looking at it and after a while Bill and Marva went softly from the room.

"It's—it's beautiful, darling," Marva whispered. "And I'm so glad you're back."

"Say, I almost forgot." Bill fumbled in his pocket, pulled out a folded slip of yellow paper. "Know what this is?"

"Bill, it isn't—"

"It is," he said. "It's a police permit, signed in gold and everything. Today—Christmas Day—we're going for a helicopter ride. We'll see the city and the clouds and even the ocean. We can stay out all day, just so we have the 'copter back tonight."

"But where will we get a 'copter?"

"Special gift from the police—chauffeur and everything," Bill grinned. "I threatened to sue for false arrest."

THE END



Stoically, they rode the ship toward their destiny.

O' Captain, My Captain

By IVAR JORGENSEN

For twenty years this crew had roamed the System. But now it was over and the time had come for them to return to Earth—where they would be considered freaks. They shrank from the torment and loneliness, yet their greatest concern was: How will they receive our Captain?

CAPTAIN MARTELLO knew every inch of the ship. After twenty years, the Captain thought, pacing up and down the little cabin and holding tight to the dispatch, after twenty years you get to know your own ship pretty well. And your run, too.

Jupiter to Earth. Mean distance, 370,300,000 miles. Martello looked at the dispatch again. For twenty years, Jupiter-Earth, Earth-Jupiter, mean distance 370,300,000 miles, and now it was all over. The Captain drew a deep breath and started out of the cabin (whose paint had long since started to flake and whose few austere furnishings were long since old and well-worn) and wondered what to tell the crew.

"Morning, Cap'n." Martello

glanced up. It was Sullivan—one of the substantial percentage of the crew who had been with the ship since Martello first came aboard (20th May, 2079, something in the Captain's mind whispered) and was still there, twenty years later. Sullivan, like the other members of the crew, was short, stocky, almost five-by-five, bald, space-tanned. He wore only a rag; no more was needed in the heat of the fore section. Sullivan was perfectly adapted for space: sturdy, practically unbreakable, a powerful machine designed for stoking spaceship jets and not much else. On Earth he'd be a pitiful little ape, Martello reflected; here, on The Ship (it once had had a name, but that was years ago; twenty years of ferrying between

Jupiter and Earth had erased whatever name it had once had and left it just The Ship) he fit in perfectly with his environment.

But that was all ended now, Martello thought, crumpling the dispatch a little tighter. *And I have to go back to Earth too.*

"Get the crew together," Martello said to Sullivan. "Get everyone here as quick as you can. Something important's come up."

"Right-o," said Sullivan (all formalities had long since vanished, long ago when captain and crew had fused into the smooth-running unit that carried goods between Jupiter and Earth). He scurried away into the dimly-lit corridor leading to the jet section.

Martello paced up and down. There would be no opening for them on Earth; the spacelines were finished and everyone knew it. There's no market for a second-hand ferry captain, Martello thought grimly — especially one like me.

"What's up, Cap'n?"

"Yeah, what happened?" asked another as, one by one, the crew filed in. Martello studied them. Most, like Sullivan, had been with The Ship since even before Martello's time, had been with The Ship

so long that they were just extensions of the jet tubes by now. Sullivan had been in the Ferry Service over forty years, or so he had once told Martello, and probably all of it had been spent aboard this ship. And that meant a couple of hours loading on Jupiter, and then the ten-day trip to Earth, and then a couple of hours loading on Earth, followed by the ten-day trip back. Theoretically there was supposed to be two days free leave for the crew at the conclusion of each round trip, and at first Martello had insisted on having The Ship's men take the required time off. But they had obviously not wanted to, and, after a while, Martello had seen why: The Ship was their world. Offship they were just a pack of ugly little dwarfs, unwanted and laughed-at on Earth and Jupiter alike. There were not enough ferries in operation for there to be a substantial colony of ferrymen at either end, and the crew had no congenial place to go while offship. So they stopped going, and the two-day free leave became a memory and then not even that. The Ship was The World for her crew, and they had no desire ever to leave. Life, for them, consisted of loading and ten-day trip,

loading and ten-day trip, and they neither expected nor asked for change.

But now, Martello thought, they were getting it. The routine was about to halt. The Captain watched as the crew stood patiently waiting. An outsider might have thought they looked all alike, but not Martello; twenty years' experience called to mind the scar above the right eye and associated it with Stevelman, or the long gash on the chest which belonged to Keller.

"Somethin' wrong, Captain Martello?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid," Martello said, in a voice as resonant and commanding as could be achieved. "Something very serious has come up."

Martello wondered how the crew would be able to shift once they were put on their own, now that The Ship was to be taken away. All these ugly little men, bald and space-tanned, some of them naked and sweating from their exertions at the jets; how would they be able to survive in a world where they knew no one and had no function? *And me*, Martello began, and cut the thought off short.

"Schedule, Captain," Sullivan said quietly, and Martello

realized that the crew had been assembled and waiting for almost five minutes Ship-time. The sacred schedule. Martello smiled. Well, that was done with.

"I'll make it short, if not sweet," the Captain said, staring hard at the crewmen. "Effective 25 August, 2099, the Jupiter-Earth ferry is to be replaced by matter-transmitter service. Which means we're cashiered."

Martello saw a wave of anger mixed with fear sweep over the faces of the crew. They began to mutter to each other, in an angry monotone buzz.

"Quiet. That's not the worst of it yet. We all knew this was coming, eventually; the Mars line got theirs a couple of years ago, and it couldn't be long before the same thing happened to us. But at least the Mars ferry-men were given other jobs."

"What's going to happen to us?" Keller shouted.

"Good question," Martello said, looking anxiously at the worried faces. A bolt of pity went through the Captain, pity for the crewmen so capable on board and so helpless when dumped into a world that didn't need them.

"We're to take the ship back to Earth and dump off

the present cargo. That's to be our final load. The Ship is to be retired—my guess is they'll just scrap it—and we're to be pensioned out of the Ferry Service. It only takes four men to operate both ends of a matter-transmitter, and we're not needed. Especially since they intend replacing all the spacelines with transmitters as soon as the receiving poles can be established. So we've had it, men."

"We're not going to take this lying down," Sullivan yelled, in his rumbling bass voice. "Suppose we refuse to go down? We could stay up here forever—as pirates, if necessary." His anger showed through his heavy space-tan; the scar he had acquired in the jet blowup of '84 blazed bright white against his skin.

"No," Martello said quietly. "Aside from the fact that I don't intend to ruin our reputation and that of the whole Ferry Service, it would never work. Maybe the idea of piracy sounds good now, but try to find another ship in space: it's tougher than needles in haystacks, in the first place, and in the second place there aren't going to be any other ships to rob in a few more years. And you can't commit piracy on a matter-transmitter beam."

Sullivan subsided — his long-instilled loyalty for Martello was too powerful for him even to try to argue—but it was obvious to the Captain that the veteran ferryman was angry and dangerous. Martello glanced at the big chronometer overhead.

"Almost time for deceleration. Sullivan, pick a crew and get to work; I want to talk to the rest of you."

Captain Martello faced them squarely.

"That's the position. What do you mean to do about it—within the law?"

"Why don't we ask them to sell us The Ship, Captain?" said a voice from the back. It was Banneman, a younger man who had come aboard about ten years before, and who had not yet fully gone bald and near-black from the cosmic rays that got through the shielding. "Look, we don't want to go to Earth and they don't want us. We're not fitted for life on Earth. Some of us haven't been on the outside of a planet in twenty years. Why don't we buy The Ship from the government and just live on it? We could collect our pensions in food and fuel at regular intervals."

"Yeah," Stevelman added —Martello recalled that Stev-

elman had been one of the first to stop taking leaves, preferring instead to stay on ship. "We could even run our own private ferry service. For people who didn't trust the matter-transmitters, maybe."

Martello leaned back against the wall and, for a moment, permitted the suggestion to seem plausible, before rejecting it.

"I don't think they'd do it. They want us out of space, and they don't want us drifting around on our own. No other ship's ever been allowed to do it; why us? No. Listen to me: you're all grown men, and you're going to have to face this like men. We're going to take The Ship to Earth, unload our cargo, and hand over The Ship. Then we're going out into the world to shift for ourselves. It's not too late for you to forget The Ship and settle down on a planet."

Martello looked at them. They were obviously discontented, but they loved and respected their Captain, and they were listening.

"Back to your posts, now. Let's get this old crate down to Earth in record time!"

The crew dispersed. Captain Martello opened the door of the cabin and walked inside, locking the door. No one

was going to come bothering now.

Fine advice, Martello thought, fingering the long row of logbooks filled during twenty years of ferrying. "You're all grown men." I told them. I talked to them like a mother. Like a mother.

Captain Martello pulled down a logbook at random and flipped through its pages, smiling absently at the close-packed, tiny writing. *I've held their hands for twenty years, and nursed them. But who's holding my hand? What am I going to do when we get back to Earth? You can't tell the captain from the cabin boy without a scorecard.*

The mirror—Martello's one concession to vanity—reflected ironhard muscles, firm, stocky body, gleaming bald head. *All my hair—last had any on Aug. 30, 2088. Right here in the logbook.*

Martello leafed through the pages and found the entry. "Today my remaining strands of hair fell victim to the rays. Now I know I've left Earth for good. They should see me now." Further down the page was one of the countless notations of completion which made up the bulk of Martello's entries. "Landed Jupiter today and unloaded ten crates. They never tell me what I'm

carrying; I wonder if the men ever think of looking? Probably these were just ten crates of respirators, but it might have been anything else. Ten crates of the new green lipsticks I hear all the women on Earth are using this year, maybe. I'm sure the Jovian females wouldn't want to be behind style.

"The crew voted not to take the two days again, so we're loading up tonight and heading right back. At this rate we'll average better than sixteen round trips an Earth year, and that should be a record. Maybe I'll apply for a medal."

Martello put the book back and sat down gently, flicking up the oxygen level in the cabin a bit. This room was home, and would be for another day—no more. On Ship Martello was boss, the wise, respected, infallible leader. Better than boss: God. But on Earth?

It's been a long time. Perhaps suicide (contemplated at 20) would have been better than this eternal shuttling between Jupiter and Earth. But one could get used to the shuttling, even come to love it. Only eventually the wonderful security of the shuttling had to end, and when it does end—as it is ending now—

back to Earth. And there, Martello knew, there was no godhood waiting, just laughter.

The crew would make out all right; they weren't sensitive enough to be disturbed, once the transition was made. *But their position is different entirely*, Martello thought, leaning back with eyes closed. Tomorrow the closed cycle of days would break open and captain and crew would spill out onto Earth. The only thing to do was to rest, and to begin all over to build up strength.

Someone was banging on the door. Hard.

"Wake up, Captain! We've put down!"

Martello leaped up from the hammock. For the first time in twenty years, the Captain had overslept and had failed to supervise personally the landing on Earth. Not that Sullivan couldn't handle the spiral landing orbit just as well, and possibly even better, but Martello had always been there. Until now. The pattern was starting to break down.

Martello selected the most impressive uniform of the three in the wardrobe and put it on. It was only necessary to wear full dress every ten days, while unloading; the

ship's dehumidifier didn't work very well any more, and Martello generally wore only enough to emphasize the existence of a gulf—a tiny one, but still a gulf—between captain and crew. There was no real need for the crew to wear anything in the heat of the jet sections, and they rarely did while working. The habit had begun—somewhat hesitantly—about five years after Martello had taken over.

The Captain when dressed, left the cabin and started out to supervise the unloading, another customary job. But Sullivan had already started the work, and Martello saw there was no reason to interfere. Sullivan had seen to it that all the men were properly dressed before they went outside, and that each crate was being checked out properly. Martello, suddenly feeling the traditional steel exterior of a space captain in port too heavy to maintain, sat down weakly on a bulkhead and watched.

"All the cargo's out, Captain," Sullivan said. He paused. "There's a crowd outside."

"Souvenir hunters, probably," said Martello. "They each want a chunk of The Ship to take home."

Sullivan ignored this. "Any orders?"

Martello felt an intense desire to be alone, all alone with The Ship and no one else.

"Take the men outside and shut the hatch after you."

"You staying here?" Sullivan asked, still obstinately standing near the hatch.

"I have some last-minute things to finish up," Captain Martello said, wishing fervently Sullivan would leave. Every moment the little man continued standing there seemed to make things worse.

"Get out," Martello said, slouching despondently on the bulkhead.

"Anything I can do, captain?"

"Get out!"

Sullivan retreated a couple of steps, and then approached Martello. "Captain . . . I know what it must be like." Sullivan reached out to take Martello's arm. "Come on—let's go."

Infuriated, Martello suddenly reached out and knocked Sullivan sprawling with a backhand blow. Sullivan hit the wall with a dull bang and got up slowly. Martello watched him; it was the first time the Captain had struck a crewman in twenty years, except for an incident the day after Martello had taken over The Ship.

"I know what it's like," Sul-

livan said quietly. He turned and left, and Martello sat there in the dimness, staring at nothing.

Twenty years seemed to float by. All of Martello's great golden accomplishment of becoming a captain seemed to turn to dross. It was all over now, and all empty.

The hatch turned, and Sullivan came back in. From the outside, Captain Martello heard the noise of a huge crowd.

"They're all waiting for you, Captain. You'd better come out."

Slowly, reluctantly, Captain Martello stood up and followed Sullivan, walking slowly through the hatch. It would be the first time she had stood on the solid ground of Earth since her unprecedented attainment of a captaincy, twenty years before. It didn't feel very good to be back.

An immense crowd was waiting for her out there, and a great roar went up as Sullivan and Captain Martello emerged from the ship. A little knot of officers in resplendent uniforms was waiting. Martello recognized the Major General who had commissioned her in 2079. He had been very much bewildered at the prospect of giving a

woman command of a ship, but she had fulfilled the requirements, come through all the tests magnificently, and they had had no choice. The Major General—she had forgotten his name—was now glorious in the uniform of a Marshal, and he came towards her, with microphone in hand.

He was saying something about her, but she didn't hear the words in any coherent pattern. He was talking about her unprecedented accomplishment in being a woman space captain for over twenty years, her inflexible schedule, the way she had broken all records for the Jupiter-Earth ferry, the glory of it all, the book she would undoubtedly write, the fame everlastingly hers, and a lot of other things, while the cheering of the crowd grew and grew. They were roaring her name, over and over again.

There were women in the crowd, and Captain Martello looked at them. They were tall, soft, long-haired, pretty. They were women, *real* women. The Marshal continued to drone on, and Martello saw her crew standing in a worshipful group not far away, looking amazed and bewildered.

There were real women in

that crowd, but they were praising *her* for being a woman—she, who had the muscles and the mind and the bald head of a man. And they were telling *her*, too, that she was a hero who would never be forgotten.

Suddenly she realized that the fears she had known the day before had been groundless. She would not be pensioned off and forgotten, laughed at, a strange sort of freak. No; she was a hero. Of course she would never be able to take her place among other women, but that was no cause for fear; rather, that was her great claim to glory.

They were pinning some sort of medal on her, but she hardly noticed.

Twenty years ago she had made her choice. She had given up Earth and the life of an earthwoman, and chosen to

act as if she were a man. This, she saw now, was the only fulfillment possible for her. Had she stayed on Earth, she would have been just another ugly duckling. But she made herself into something unique.

Sullivan moved closer to her as the cheering swelled and swelled.

"I never wanted to tell you this on Ship," he said, "but I think you're sort of beautiful, Captain." But from his voice Captain Martello knew that he meant not the sort of beauty a man finds in a woman, but the sort he might find in a goddess.

"Until we're mustered out, Mister Sullivan, you'll address me either as Captain or as Sir," Captain Martello said coldly. But there were tears at the edges of her eyes, and she began to smile a little as the cheering grew still louder.

THE END



"I wonder who the center one's for?"



GROWING PAINS

By ROBERT ARNETTE

Growing pains are usually associated with childhood, but Grandpa was 200 years old and so far as he was concerned, he'd just begun to really live!



The old man

"IT SHOULD be a good party," Gordon Mosley said, eyeing the cakes, "a real good party."

The broad lucite table along one side of the clinic lab resembled a baking contest at the county fair. There were large cakes and small; pink, yellow and blue. An angelfood with thick, light frosting represented the labor of a farm woman over the Missouri line in Arkansas.

The biggest one, from a baker in Jefferson City, was studded with 200 candles.

"Too bad Gramp can't eat any," Dr. Alan Williams said.

"Why not?"

Alan turned from the window with a sigh. "Do you want to analyze for poison and put them back together again?"

"No thanks," Gordon answered. "Is that why Irene's whipping up another one out in the kitchen?"

"That's why. And you'll analyze a piece of that, too, just to be sure no one doped the sugar."

"Who'd want to kill Gramp?" Gordon asked. "He's the greatest old guy in the world."

"Every stupid fanatic this side of China wants to kill him," Alan scowled and said bitterly.

Several hundred people had gathered for Gramp's birthday, but not all to help celebrate it . . .

The murmuring crowd was invisible behind the high brick wall, but you could see on down the wooded slope to where the setting sun cast



glared defiantly, refusing to die.

coins of silver along a finger of the Lake of the Ozarks.

"Twelve hours and Gramp will be 200," Alan said absently, "at 5:30 a.m. September 23. If he lives through the night, we're all right."

"How is he?"

"Sleeping." Alan scribbled a new entry in the case history that already filled a filing cabinet. "In the past week he's averaged 23 hours sleep a day. I'm afraid he's sleeping himself to death."

Dr. Williams walked nervously to the other window and stared up the hill to the small, ancient cottage where Gramp lived. A plastic window flashed golden in the late sun. The rich fragrance of baking drifted in from the lab kitchen.

For the first time, Alan wondered if he, and his father before, had been right in devoting their lives to one case history, to give all their energies and the science of gerontology to one man.

Had they been right in keeping a man alive for 200 years?

A large part of the crowded, frightened world said "no." And that part would do many things to keep Gramp from living 12 more hours.

"I wish I knew what's go-

ing on in that old carcas," Alan mused. He missed the figure of the shrunken old man, his skin wrinkled and brown, eyes bright and intelligent, walking slowly around the cottage. For the past week Gramp had not stirred from his bed. All his physical activity, it seemed, was slowing to a stop.

"Do you think he'll make it?" Gordon asked.

"I don't know. There's nothing more I can do. We fixed his heart. Blood vessels are elastic. We built in an artificial kidney when he almost died 13 years ago. The aldosterone shots are keeping his glands in balance. Metabolism's good and there's not a malignant growth in his body. There's only one other thing we know that a man needs to stay alive—that's an interest in being alive."

"He's had that," Gordon said. "He's all fired up writing his memoirs, and they're good. He's proud of that closet full of manuscript."

"But that's stopped, too," Alan said. "It worries me. He's in a progressive coma, while every measurable function of his body goes on without serious change. I don't see how he can die, but I'm afraid that's what he's doing."

Did you see the last entry in his diary?"

"Yeah. I've got it here." Gordon pulled out a sheet of paper, half-filled with Gramp's neat, archaic handwriting.

"'Something wonderful is happening...'" he read aloud.

"That's the last sentence," Alan said. "He didn't put a period at the end, as though he were too tired. But it's a clear thought, and he dropped it halfway down the page as though he were beginning something new."

Twilight crept across the Ozarks while the sun played a gaudy color game across the sky.

"You're too sensitive to the old guy," Gordon said. "Why don't you get some sleep? You've been with him for 15 years and you know every cell in his body. If he dies, you've done your best."

"I suppose you're right."

"You know," Gordon said, "there really may be a point beyond which God doesn't intend a man to live."

"Don't say that!" Alan snapped. "You sound like that gang of idiots camped down the hill, mumbling the superstitious gibberish they call religion."

"Sorry."

"I didn't mean to blow up,"

Alan grinned crookedly. "Certainly God alone knows what's happening to the old boy, but some of that crowd sounds vicious."

The kitchen door swung open and Irene came out, carrying a three-layer cake with white icing. She wore an apron over her nurse uniform.

"Here it is," she said gaily, "wouldn't you like a piece?"

"Run some tests on it, Gordon."

"Tests?" Irene put the cake on the doctor's desk. "What tests?"

"For poison."

"You think I'd poison the old guy after working for you and him 10 years?"

"Not you," Alan said. "Someone."

"Sorry to spoil it," Gordon said. He deftly sliced out a portion of cake and moved to his lab desk.

The gate guard came in. He had been hired to keep out the crowds, but the six-foot stone wall wouldn't discourage anyone who wanted it badly enough to bring a ladder.

"That Mrs. Bradenburg's here again," he said, "wants to talk to you, doc."

"What the devil does she want this time?"

"Don't know. She—"

"She wants to talk to Dr.

Williams," a baritone voice boomed behind him.

"Come in," Alan said reluctantly. "We're about to have supper."

"I won't keep you." Mrs. Bradenburg's heavy masculine figure was clothed in a wrinkled gray uniform of the welfare service. Grayshot hair was cut straight and severely at the neckline. Her flat eyes carried a sadistic glint that comes from too many years of saying "no" to starving transients, destitute women and hungry children. Mrs. Bradenburg was state director of services for the aged.

She plopped down at Alan's desk and crossed her fat legs.

"I want to know if you intend to continue this stupid experiment," she said abruptly.

"Continue?" The question thoroughly surprised him. "Of course, I'll continue as many years as Gramp lives."

"I don't mean that," Mrs. Bradenburg snapped. "I mean the next 11 hours. Are you going to keep him alive until his birthday?"

The cold-bloodedness of the woman unnerved him, but Alan controlled the rage creeping like acid through his flesh.

"You think I should kill him?"

"You could let him die," she said nonchalantly, fumbling in her massive shoulder bag. She pulled out a St. Louis newspaper. "See that headline?"

Alan read it.

ONLY 16 HOURS UNTIL
GRAMP HITS 200.

He handed back the paper without reading the story.

"Every newspaper in the country looks like that," the woman rumbled, her voice increasing in pitch and intensity. "The world is waiting for this symbolic moment—" she slapped the paper on the desk like a club—"this moment when the first man on earth is 200 years old. All the old people are waiting, because if one man can do it, they think they can."

"Is that bad?"

"Of course it's bad! You're destroying the world. Half the population of the world is being taxed to death right now to keep the old people alive. If you won't let 'em die, how can we take care of 'em?"

"Oh, for God's sake," Alan muttered. "Welfare isn't my problem. Old people can work if government and industry will let them."

Mrs. Bradenburg stood up,

paced nervously around the room. She peered over Gordon's shoulder and fingered the rack of syringes on the table.

"My job is to keep people alive," Alan said. "I'll keep Gramp alive as long as I can."

"That's your last word?" Her face had now purpled with anger.

"That's it. And you'd better take some shots for those arteries. You're showing signs of sclerosis."

The welfare director stalked out of the lab. The gate guard crept in past her at the door.

"Now it's the Krishna," he said apologetically.

"Oh Lord! Not that, too."

"He's headin' for the cottage."

"What?"

"Had two thugs with him. I couldn't keep them out."

Alan toppled a chair getting out the door and raced up the gravel path toward the cottage.

Near the front he intercepted the Krishna, flanked by two burly guards, striding majestically toward Gramp's home. The self-appointed religious leader's white satin robe dragged the ground, its hem frayed and soiled. The garment was bound at the waist with a hemp rope black-

ened with years of dirt and grease.

"What do you want?" Alan snapped.

"Peace," boomed the Krishna, raising a huge hand in benediction. "I wish to confer blessings upon the old man."

"What blessings?"

The Krishna's band of phrenetic followers had come with him a month ago to camp on the hillside below the laboratory and Gramp's cottage.

"The blessings of Heaven," the Krishna said, "for his hour is at hand."

"Not yet," Alan said thinly, "he's still alive."

"Not for long." The prophet's voice lowered in pitch, his flat blue eyes gleaming. "I have prophesied he shall not reach his 200th birthday. It is God's will that man's days be numbered. You tamper with ways of the devil."

"Nonsense!" Anger crept through his blood. A poison mist of menace settled over the hillside. "God has given me the task of keeping men alive."

"He shall die," the Krishna intoned, moving his fingers to form a cryptic symbol, "before the dawn."

"Get out." Alan's fists

clenched. "Get out of here. Now!"

He started forward but the guards blocked his path.

"No violence," the Krishna boomed. The guards fell back. "Ours is the way of peace, but God's justice will come upon you. The old man shall not live."

"If he lives, your followers will be less faithful with their nickels and dimes. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

The Krishna's eyes narrowed, but he did not answer. Instead he turned pompously and strode down the hill. The two thugs glared back as they followed their leader.

Then a violent trembling beset Alan's hands and thighs, reaction to the adrenalin his glands had poured into his blood at the threat of violence.

With the trembling came disgust that he should lose control so easily; revulsion that man in his advance through the centuries could not weed out the terrible traits of intolerance, fear and fanaticism.

Mrs. Bradenburg, the efficient civil servant, wished the old people to die so her job would be less difficult. The Krishna typified the diseased clots of humanity which al-

ways had distorted the word of God to fit their own mercenary wishes and beliefs.

Alan waited on the path while the eastern sky sent its dark blue of night sliding to the west. He shivered involuntarily despite the sultry warmth of the evening. Sweat trickled cold down his back.

Light flashed on the path as the laboratory door burst open. Gordon ran up the hill.

"Look," he panted, holding something in the palm of his hand. Alan bent in the failing light to see a smudge of white powder.

"What is it?"

"Pulverized glass," Gordon said, "in the cake Irene baked. It must have been in the flour."

Alan nodded, a great weariness gripping him. Gramp was dying, but the world was anxious to help him on his way.

"That was a new bag of flour," Gordon said angrily. "I'm going to find out who's responsible."

"Not now. We found it in time. Tonight we've got to keep watch. If Gramp lives, tomorrow will be time enough to investigate."

"Okay, if you say so," Gordon answered reluctantly, dusting his hand on his trousers. He looked up at the

first stars. Far down the hill a baby cried in the stillness. "Seems like the whole universe is waiting to see if Gramp makes it. Why is tonight a crisis?"

"I wish I knew," Alan said moodily. "I'm going to check him now. Tell Irene to bring up his intravenous."

Gordon returned to the lab. The doctor opened the cottage door softly, afraid he would find death there already.

It was dark inside. He switched on the night light beside Gramp's bed. Then he exhaled the breath he had been holding unconsciously.

The old man was alive, his respiration almost imperceptible in the slight movement of his thin chest under the sheet.

From the routine of centuries, Alan felt the pulse. Normal, if you could define normal at this age. He listened to Gramp's chest. No lung congestion. Heart strong.

But the old man did not move. He had not moved for 24 hours. His skin held the normal color of blood coursing beneath wrinkled epidermis.

But the skin was cold.

As cold as death.

Alan leaned back and pressed his temples, trying to conjure the answer, aware of

the pitifully short distance his knowledge and research had carried him up the endless ladder of man's cry for immortality.

He didn't hear Irene come in.

He peeled back an eyelid. The bright blue eye stared back at him, aware and intelligent.

"He can see us!" Irene exclaimed. "I swear he knows what we're doing."

Alan nodded, a prickle of the unknown creeping up his spine—*witchcraft and devils and voodoo*. A small electric clock whirred quietly in a dark corner of the room. The nurse glanced nervously over her shoulder.

"I've got the creeps," she whispered. "It's like angels dancing on the ends of my nerves—or devils."

"I know what you mean," the doctor said, and somehow her remark sounded neither ridiculous nor superstitious. The cottage and the night had the feel of pending change.

"Perhaps death has a special ceremony for a man this old," he said quietly, not sure if he believed it or not. "Give me the syringe."

Irene handed him the instrument, removing sterile cotton from the needle.

From habit Alan held the tube to the light to check the level of the fluid.

"Where did you get this?" he asked sharply.

"From the rack in the lab," Irene said nervously, "where we always keep it."

"Doesn't look right," Alan muttered. At the risk of contaminating the fluid, he unscrewed the needle and sniffed. Then he tipped the tube to his lips and tasted.

"Water!" he exclaimed. "Not even sterile water. Tastes like it came out of a stagnant ditch. With that in his veins, Gramp would be dead in an hour."

"That woman," Irene cried in dismay. "That awful woman!"

"What woman?"

"Mrs. Brandenburg," the nurse said, "she was over there by the table. She could have switched them."

"I suppose you're right," Alan said. His hand trembled as he spilled the water on the floor, watched the deadly stain blacken a patch of the rug.

"Get Gordon to fill a fresh one," he said. "Then call the state police and have Mrs. Brandenburg arrested."

The reaction was the same as sticking a needle into a

corpse. But Gramp's fragile respiration continued unchanged. A drop of blood oozed out behind the needle and clotted cleanly.

Later Alan stood outside in the sultry darkness, listening to the hypnotic buzz of locusts. He had witnessed death only a few times, but it's odor was in the air tonight, soft and not unpleasant like the first yellow leaf trembling down from a maple tree.

A flare of heat lightning blazed in the northwest.

"Shall I watch first?" Irene asked.

"Yes, if you will. I'm tired. Let Gordon relieve you and wake me at three."

It seemed only a moment later that he writhed in the torment of a nightmare. The mob, screaming for blood, poured inside the walls, torches waving high, and leading them were Mrs. Brandenburg and the Krishna, his white robe flapping in the wind.

They ripped his clothes, tearing him away from the door of the cottage, and the welfare woman's talons dug into the flesh of his shoulder...

"Sorry, doc." It was Gordon's hand on his shoulder. "It's 3 a. m. Irene said you left orders to be wakened."

"Yes," Alan mumbled, sitting up. "Yes, thanks."

The nightmare faded as his senses cleared. He felt doped and his shirt and trousers were soaked with sweat. Distant thunder muttered through the open window.

Gordon walked back with him to the cottage.

"Storm brewing," Mosley said, "but I think it'll pass around."

"How is he?"

"All right, I think." Gordon opened the door. Alan leaned over the bed.

"He's stopped breathing!"

The doctor ripped back the sheet and placed his hand on Gramp's chest. The flesh was cold.

But the heart was beating—faintly, rhythmically.

"Doc—" Gordon whispered as though he must be in tune with the night, "—I don't think he's dying at all."

Alan turned sharply. "Do you know how death comes to a man this old?"

"No. I admit I'm no doctor, but I've seen people die. Look at this."

Mosley turned the sheet back a little more and tried gently to lift Gramp's arm. It was rigid as the branch of a fallen tree.

"The legs are the same," he said.

"Rigor mortis," Alan whispered.

"Rigor mortis? And the heart still beating?" He stared bewildered at the doctor. Alan shook his head.

"I don't know. We can only wait and see."

It must have been this way more than a century ago when a doctor sat beside the bed of a child dying of pneumonia, before antibiotics; when there was nothing more that could be done and the doctor knew the knife thrust of inadequacy.

Sometimes, in those days, there was a crisis past and a child lived.

This crisis, too, might pass, permitting an old man to see the dawn of 200 years.

But the thought was alien to the rigid controls Alan had buckled to his emotions. He knew Gramp would die someday. But he had tried to think of the gentle, wise old man simply as a clinical case to be written up in the medical journals after death as a stepping stone for another old man or woman to live a year longer.

Gordon tiptoed out. Alan wondered lethargically why it was so important that his patient should live another few hours. The importance

was symbolic, of course, a stubborn pride in proving that it could be done, that man could round a second century.

But this morning, the ancient clock and its storehouse of years seemed geared to a time bomb, the explosive moment that would tell life from death.

A flash of lightning drew Alan's eye to the window, held it in the afterimage of cloth whipping in the rising wind.

What cloth?

He leaped from the chair as a jet of blue flame spurted through the window. A heavy explosion jarred him, ripped a two-foot hole in the opposite wall of the room.

In that instant, while his body hurtled toward the window, he realized someone had fired a high-caliber explosive bullet—intended for Gramp.

With a bellow of rage, Alan plunged out the open window, ripping through the cloth screen already perforated by the gun blast. He forgot the lilac bush until he was threshing in the broken branches.

Lightning flashed again, not far away, as he tore free. He saw the running figure not 50 feet away, the bizarre silhouette of a squat, masculine witch with cloak flapping wildly in the wind.

"Stop!"

Alan raced through the darkness, guided by the sound of heavy feet running toward the wall. As his mind cleared of shock, he remembered that part of the wall. An oak tree grew almost against it, branches sweeping low to afford an easy swing over the brick barricade.

The wall was only 100 feet away, but he was gaining. Now he could hear the gunman, panting heavily.

Lightning flashed again.

The tail of the Krishna's robe whipped out behind him, almost in Alan's grasp.

But the oak was nearer. He saw a shimmer of white as the Krishna leaped high for the low-hanging branch.

Alan leaped, too, in a desperate flying tackle. His clutching fingers tangled in cloth, grasped a bony ankle.

The doctor hit the earth with a sickening thud, but the Krishna came crashing down out of the tree with him.

Alan had a knee in his gut when lightning flashed again.

But this time the lightning was a clubbed fist on the back of his neck. The Krishna's buddies had come along.

Alan came out of it fighting.

"Take it easy, doc. It's me, Gordon. Ouch!"

The lab assistant was trying to hold his arms, but Alan landed a kick on the shin before he quieted. He could see the pale, worried oval of Irene's face hovering mistily above him.

"They got away," he mumbled. "How is he? How's Gramp?"

"Easy, Doc. We haven't checked yet. We heard you yell and this ruckus in the trees and came running."

Alan scrambled to his feet, a burr of pain gnawing at the base of his skull. He staggered, but Gordon and Irene caught him.

"They shot him," he gasped, realizing he had left his patient for this wild, useless chase through the dark. "They shot Gramp!"

He ran unsteadily to the cottage, burst open the door. The two crowded in behind him.

Gramp lay still as death on the bed. But the explosive charge apparently had missed him. Alan collapsed in the chair.

"It was the Krishna and his gang," he explained. "Shot through the window. Blew a hole in the wall over there."

Gordon squatted to examine the ragged opening where the charge had exploded at the baseboard. He

squinted at the window and back again.

"Did you move Gramp's bed, Doc?"

"No, why?"

"Come here and look."

Alan crouched painfully on his hands and knees and sighted along Gordon's pointing finger.

"See what I mean?"

Alan saw it, but he didn't believe it. He scrambled to the window. Placing his head at the exact point where the gun had been fired, he sighted again.

The point of impact on the wall was out of sight behind the bed.

"The bullet—" Irene whispered.

"Unless we're all crazy," Alan moistened dry lips, "that bullet entered under Gramp's right clavicle, tore through his chest and went out through the mattress!"

He examined the old man again. There was no sign of an entering wound.

"Here it is!" Gordon had searched along the edge of the mattress. He found a rent in the fabric and fragments of foam rubber where the bullet had ripped out.

"He turned the bullet—" Irene's knuckles were white against her mouth. "He made

the bullet go around him!" She was near hysteria.

"Don't be an idiot!" Alan barked. "He hasn't the energy to move an arm. And don't pull any supernatural claptrap on me. There's an explanation somewhere."

Gordon's eyes were skeptical and frightened.

"All right say it," Alan said angrily, "what do you suggest?" The lab assistant shrugged his shoulders.

"We could move him and— and see if there's a wound where the bullet came out and went through the bed."

"There's no blood." Alan shook his head. "He's so near death we don't dare move him."

That was reason enough. But Alan knew, in addition, he couldn't trust his mind to accept what they would find under the old man. If there was no wound but a punctured sheet and mattress . . .

"No. We can't move him."

"Okay." Gordon exhaled heavily. "It'll probably make more sense in daylight. Let me take the watch now, Doc. You get some sleep."

"No." Alan shook his head stubbornly. "I'll see him through. I don't think they'll be back."

"You sure you're good for another two hours?"

"I'm sure."

"All right. Come on Irene. We'll send down some coffee after a while."

The bulk of the storm passed to the south, but the skirt of the huge cloud brushed the land with a light drizzle and gentle breeze.

Under the hypnotic spell of rain spattering from the eaves, both the pain and tension oozed out of Alan's body. Somehow the electric charge of danger seemed gone from the night and the cool, washed dawn was not far away.

He didn't remember when he fell asleep.

When he awoke, dawn was there, gray and lucid before the sunrise.

Alan looked at the dial of his watch, still luminous in the half darkness. Five a. m. He yawned and peered out the window before turning to the bed.

Only 30 minutes more and Gramp . . .

Gramp was gone!

He stared at the empty bed for several seconds before comprehending. The sheet and blanket were turned back, neatly, and the imprint was there where the old man had lain immobile for nearly a week.

At the point where the ab-

dominal cavity had been was a tattered hole where a bullet had ploughed into the mattress. No blood.

And Gramp was gone.

Although stunned, doc didn't panic. He threw open the closet door. Gramp's clothes were there. Wherever he was, he was wearing only the white, sleeveless hospital gown.

Then he opened the front door. The surface of the gravel path was undisturbed. Flower beds beside the door were muddy from the rain, but the grass beyond would show no tracks—if Gramp left any.

The old man couldn't have moved by himself. That meant someone had entered the cottage while the doctor slept and carried Gramp away.

The frail old body was light, but even so there should be some mark in the gravel.

"Gordon, come here! Irene!" Alan yelled, running toward the clinic. They ran to meet him. He related rapidly what had happened. The three scattered over the grounds, searching.

They found nothing.

"He couldn't just up and fly away," Irene said, "could he?"

"I was asleep," Alan said dully. "Someone carried him."

"How?" Gordon asked. "There's a hundred people milling around outside the gate."

"Call the state police."

"I did, two hours ago. They've got Mrs. Bradenburg and the Krishna in custody. And there's been a patrol car making the rounds ever since our wild-eyed friend took that pot shot."

Alan hurried to the front gate with Gordon and Irene just as the black patrol hemisphere glided to a stop.

"Have you seen Gramp?"

"No," the patrolman answered, puzzled, "what—"

"He's gone. Disappeared. Someone must have carried him away. He was stiff as a corpse."

"That's impossible," the patrolman said. "I've been cruising your wall for two hours. Nobody went in or out."

The word spread rapidly down the hill to the waiting crowd. Within minutes the woods were full of searchers, shouting back and forth in the still morning air.

"They'll trample him," Alan muttered.

"Someone's got to find him," Irene said quietly.

"Maybe . . . down by the lake." For some reason the

thought was crystal clear, but Alan didn't realize he had whispered it.

"What did you say?"

"The lake," Alan repeated, "you know, down below where he loved to sit and watch the water and the birds."

Gordon looked at him strangely.

"You need some rest, Doc, that's almost a half mile."

"He got out of the cottage and over the wall," Alan said. "Can you think of a better place to look?"

Without waiting for an answer, he hurried around the brick enclosure and down the steep path Gramp had followed often in past years.

He slipped and fell once on the greasy clay. But there were no tracks in the mud before him. Gordon and Irene followed slowly behind.

A finger of the artificial lake had crept back in a narrow valley, the slopes too precipitous to support tourist cabins. Through the trees, Alan caught sight of the limestone outcropping that formed a small cliff over the water.

Something else gleamed white in the rising sun.

He ran down the steep path, lost his footing and scrambled out on the rock ledge on hands and knees.

"Morning, Doc," Gramp said. "Nice day after the rain."

Stunned by the incongruity of the old man squatting there, the white hospital gown wrapped around his bony knees, Alan collapsed panting on the rock.

Humming a quiet tune, Gramp skimmed a flat stone over the still water and watched it dance briefly before sinking.

"How—" Alan tried to shake the question loose from his parched throat. "How did you get down here?"

Behind it were a thousand questions. How did you live? Why didn't you die? Where were your tracks on the path?

"Don't exactly know, yet," Gramp said slowly, "but it's comin' to a focus pretty fast. 'I woke up and you were asleep. It was startin' to get light and the air smelled so good, I just wished to be here. And I was here.'"

"You wished?" Alan stared in disbelief.

"That's it. I wished."

Gordon and Irene came out of the woods. Alan motioned them to silence. His heart thumped heavily in his chest.

Gramp stretched lazily and sprawled out in the sun, an arm under his head.

"Don't lie on the cold rock," Irene said sharply. "You'll catch cold."

Gramp gazed at her calmly.

"I don't think I'll catch anything anymore," he said simply. "All the time I was there in bed, something was going on in my head, like a lot of little diamonds clicking around to make a big one. I knew what was goin' on, even with my eyes shut. I saw you and I saw the Krishna and I saw the gun. I wished the bullet wouldn't hit me, and it didn't."

"What else can you wish?" Alan asked huskily.

"Most anything. Right now I can see inside that Mrs. Brandenburg, in jail down in Jeff City." Gramp's eyes seemed focused on something far away. "She doped the flour, too, you know. Her heart's not so good. I could nudge it ever so little and . . . but I won't."

"Do you—" Alan hesitated. "Do you know what happened?"

"Remember when you were 14, Doc, when every muscle and bone in your body was bustin' with growing up? That's the way it was in my head. Now I feel grown up," Gramp said simply.

"Adolescence!" Alan whispered, so low Gramp couldn't have heard it. But the old man grasped the thought directly from his mind.

"That's it. You're all adolescents. Up till now, I guess, nobody lived long enough to grow up. Maybe in the next hundred years I can help some others."

A red squirrel crawled out on a branch over their heads, chattering to scold them out of his woods.

Gramp pointed a finger and said "Bang!"

The squirrel toppled end for end out of the tree. It was dead before it struck the rock.

"Poor little feller," Gramp said. "I shouldn't've killed him, but ever since I was a kid I wished I could do that."

"Guess I'll have to watch myself from now on."

THE END

Read AMAZING STORIES!

Dramatic fiction of things to come!

*If Mankind does not improve,
tomorrow's world may be a
vicious one, a world of—*

THE SLOW AND THE DEAD

By ROBERT RANDALL

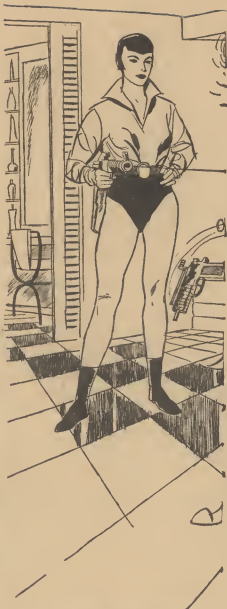
VERNON LEDWICK looked across the tavern. "So help me," he said, "if that boy doesn't watch out, I'll slap his face!"

I put my drink down on the table. "One of these days you're going to get tough with a really fast man and get a bullet through you!" Vernon had two unchangeable traits, and they made a lucky combination. He was an incorrigible hothead, and he was the fastest man on a draw you're likely to see.

"Are you suggesting that I just sit here and let some slabhead smile at my wife any time he feels like it?"

I backed up a little. I certainly didn't want to get involved in any quarrels myself. "Not at all. If you feel that your honor has been offended, you have, of course, just one thing to do."

He nodded silently and



The bullets smashed into



her body, knocking the gun from her hand.

turned his head to watch the dancers. Surveying the scene his eyes automatically sought out Mara, the dazzling blonde whose marriage to him had cost eleven men their lives so far. She was gliding smoothly across the nearly frictionless floor, spinning and weaving intricate patterns around Vernon's younger brother, Carl.

It was Mara who deserved to be slapped, not the poor guys Vern had to keep nailing. I don't mean a challenge; I mean a slap right across her behind, where it would do her some good. Mara was a flirt, a tease. She was never obvious about it, but, in spite of her subtlety, no man ever misunderstood her meaning.

Wait. I'll take that back. They did mistake her meaning; they thought she meant what she implied. They thought it was an invitation, and it wasn't—ever.

The muted throb of the automatic composing robot rose to a pulsing crescendo, then died. Carl and Mara finished their dance steps with a little flourish and threaded their way through the crowd toward our table.

Carl helped Mara to her seat and turned to me. "Where's Ceil?" he asked.

I jerked a thumb over my shoulder. "Business trip."

Mara reached out and took Vern's hand in both of hers. "Mr. Ledwick," she said formally, "may I have the next dance?"

Vernon ignored her. "What did that fellow say to you?" he asked sharply.

A puzzled frown crossed her face. "What fellow?"

"The man at the bar," Vernon said. "The one in the blue tunic with the silver lace collar. You know what I mean."

Mara glanced at the bar, and then smiled back at her husband. I held my breath in anticipation; I was afraid she'd report some sufficient provocation, and then our family would be involved in another duel. And while I didn't mind that while old Kermit was alive, I don't care for them any more. Kermit was the Old Man—Vern's and mine and Carl's.

He wasn't actually my real father. I never saw my father. My mother was widowed a week after I was born. Later, she married Kermit, and Vern was born two years after I was.

When mother died, Kermit married again, and Carl was born.

So Carl and Vern were

half brothers on their father's side, and Vern and I had the same mother. Carl and I weren't really related at all. Funny situation, and it confused everyone so much that we simply called ourselves brothers and let it go at that.

Old Kermit was a great gunman himself—he taught the three of us everything we knew—and he gloried in every victory Vern had. It kept him happy. A situation like this, with an impending duel almost inevitable, was the Old Man's greatest joy.

"Pistols for two and tea for one," he'd say. "It keeps the human race on their toes. 'An armed society is a polite society.'"

But he'd have been disappointed at this moment, because Mara shook her head.

"He didn't say anything much, Vern, so don't start heating up. When I ordered straight bourbon, he said it was nice to see a woman who could drink something besides Creme de Menthe."

Vern scowled, but Carl broke into a grin. "My God!" he said. "The oldest play in history. 'You're so *different* from the other girls, my dear,'" he mimicked in a high falsetto.

Ceil's voice came from directly behind me. "It may be

an old line, but it's an effective one." She pulled out her chair and sat down beside me, an impish grin on her face.

I squeezed her hand. "Welcome, stranger," I said. "Glad you decided to join us."

Ceil was nothing like Mara. Vern's wife was a tall, well-padded, deliciously curved blonde who never carried a pistol at any time. She didn't need to. She had other weapons that she considered more effective.

Ceil, on the other hand, was small and delicately boned—beautifully constructed, but a bit on the slim side. And, when and if we ever took out a companionate registration together, I'd never have to defend her honor for her. Two men that I knew of had thought she carried a sidearm for pure bluff and had been foolish enough to call her on it. They were both dead.

Mara said: "Please, Vern, just forget it. He wasn't insulting at all. Carl—Dennis—you're his brothers. Tell him." She looked at me and Carl with pleading eyes.

I spread my hands. What could I say? It wouldn't be gentle to say anything about it in public. And no son of Kermit Ledwick would put

up with an insult—even from a half-brother.

Carl had no such qualms. "I think she's right, Vern. Forget it."

Carl could get away with it where I couldn't. The relationship between him and Vern was a great deal closer than the feeling Vern and I had for each other. Vern and Carl, after all, were both Kermit's sons, and they seemed to consider me almost an outsider at times.

I watched Vern carefully. He ran his fingers around the rim of his glass a couple of times, scowling, and then the scowl slowly melted. "You're right. I'll forget it."

He shot a glance at the stranger at the bar, who was paying no attention to us, then smiled back at Mara.

"More drinks, anyone?" he asked. We all nodded, and Vern dialed the drinks. Four glasses rose from the center well in the table just as the music started again.

"None for you, Vern?" I asked.

"I'm in training," he said. "Cutting down. I must keep up my reflexes, you know."

I nodded in agreement. He was right. A man in his position *had* to keep in training; he had left such a trail

of bodies behind him that there were dozens of next-of-kin out hunting for his scalp, just waiting for a chance to provoke him into a fight. His fearsome draw-speed kept most of them at a distance, but if the word ever got around that Vern Ledwick no longer had the old reflexes, he'd be dead in a week.

It was tough. I was glad I'd kept my neck out of that particular noose. I've been in a few gunfights in my life—just a few serious ones, that is—but I don't make a habit of it. It's not that I'm a coward; I just keep away from situations that provoke any fights.

A good many times, I've felt glad that Ceil was armed and I wasn't obliged to defend her. Such as now, when Carl stood up and smiled at her. "Miss Ceil, may I have the pleasure?"

"You may, sir." She stood up gracefully, and the two of them walked out to the floor. When it came to dancing, Carl had to do all the work. I have an old calf wound that gives me a slight limp, and Vern simply refused to learn how.

Vern didn't say anything as they left, but I could read the look on his face. He

didn't like armed women. If anyone wanted to dance with Ceil, they asked her; they didn't have to ask me. Mara, on the other hand, couldn't be asked as citizen to citizen. Carl had to ask Vern for the privilege, and Vern revelled in it. He liked to be able to protect his woman.

Vern turned to me after they were gone. "How's the office going, Denny?" It was more to make conversation than anything else. I knew that if he'd given two hoots in hell about my business, he'd have asked me earlier in the evening.

"Not badly," I told him. "We've got a new design contract on the Barr Spaceways luxury liners. Cleegmill is doing the hull, and Jefferbeth is doing the drive installation. We've got the whole inside, including decoration."

"That's their new *Princess* trio, isn't it?"

"That's right. The first one will be the *Martian Princess*. Then we'll do the *Princess of Luna* and *Princess Dorothy*. The interiors will vary according to—"

I cut off suddenly. The man in the blue tunic had come up behind Mara. He reached out and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Your pardon, miss. May I have the honor of this dance?"

I've said I don't like a gunfight, but there are some things that just don't go. I stood up, my right hand only inches from the pistol in my hip holster. Vern was on his feet even faster. The chair he'd been sitting in toppled to the floor with a crash, and the crowd in the tavern grew deathly quiet for a moment. Then the conversation began again in low murmurs, but they continued to watch us discreetly.

In spite of the anger that I knew was seething within him, Vern's voice was level as he said: "That, sir, was a directly calculated insult. Not only is the lady deeply offended, but so am I."

The other man's hand was poised above his own weapon. "If you choose to interpret it as an insult, sir, that is your privilege. I assure you, no harm was meant to the lady."

That last sentence must have got Vern. If harm wasn't meant for the lady, it was obviously meant for him.

Vern's left hand snapped out and struck the man an open-handed blow across the cheek. The man stood rock-still.

"Very well, sir," he said, "let's make it formal."

"I would prefer to have satisfaction now," Vern said angrily. The crowd started to buzz a little louder. Any time someone openly provoked Vernon Ledwick, it was news.

"Your preferences don't make the slightest difference to me, sir," said the stranger softly. He rubbed his cheek. "The insult is, of course, on your part. You have offered me the choice. I shall insist upon tomorrow morning."

"Very well. Where?"

"Why not here?" the stranger asked. "They have an excellent duelling range in the basement."

By this time, Carl and Ceil had pushed their way back through the dancers to the table. I saw them, but Vern didn't. He was wrapped up in the excitement of a new duel.

"I shall accept that," he said. He glanced at me. "Dennis?"

I nodded. It was the only thing to do.

"My brother Dennis will be my second," Vern said. "I'll be here at—shall we say seven hundred?"

"A fine hour," said the other. He reached into his pocket, took out a cardcase, and offered a personal card

to Vern. When he had received Vern's card in return, he turned and walked off toward the bar.

Vern was still boiling. He threw the card on the table in front of me and said: "Take care of it, will you Denny? Come on, Mara, we're leaving."

Carl muttered apologies to Ceil and me and followed them out.

"What the devil happened?" Ceil wanted to know as soon as they were out of earshot.

I told her. She frowned and turned to look for the man in the blue tunic. He was nowhere to be seen.

"It sounds as though he were deliberately trying to provoke a quarrel, doesn't it? He must have known Mara wasn't armed."

"Vernon Ledwick is a name that means something," I reminded her. "There are a lot of young guns in Manhattan who would like to cut him down. He has a long list to his credit."

Ceil was looking at the card Vern had tossed on the table.

"*Jason Blade*," she read. "I never heard of him."

"Probably some damn fool who thinks it would be a

feather in his cap to knock Vern off. I feel sorry for the idiot, but what can we do?"

Ceil looked at me for a long moment. "May I speak freely, Mr. Hughes?"

"You may." Little touches like that made me admire Ceil. Too many women who wear arms still try to get away with feminine prerogatives while also insisting on the privileges of a full citizen.

"You say you feel sorry for Jason Blade," she said, "but there isn't anything you can do about it. As Vern's second, it's your legal duty to do everything in your power to call this thing off before it happens. But you won't. You know it, and I know it."

I drummed on the table with my fingertips. "Ceil, there's no sense in trying," I said. "What am I supposed to do? The man committed a deliberate breach of etiquette. Vern isn't going to let him off for anything. And I wouldn't try to talk him into it. It amounts to trying to talk Vern into having himself branded as a coward."

"Your brother, Vern," she said evenly, "is a hotheaded bully and a fool, to boot." She said it quietly, knowing full well that if her words got back to Vern there would

be hell to pay. "Mara goes around making eyes at every good looking man she meets and then expects Vern to fight her way out of it. And he does. That's the trouble—*he does.*"

"What do you mean by that crack?"

"I mean," she said, "that Vern is too damned good with a gun. Society doesn't have any place for a fool who's such a crack shot. Remember, the psychodynamacists put humanity on the right track two centuries ago when they proved that genetically and socially human beings are better off if they can take out their personal gripes in the most direct manner instead of letting them build up to something dangerous."

"I know that," I said. "Are you questioning it?"

"Of course not, you goose! It's worked wonderfully. We haven't had a war for over a hundred and fifty years, and no prospect of one in sight. But it's supposed to work genetically, too. The unstable ones automatically get themselves killed off. And it doesn't seem—"

"That's enough," I said. "My brother may not be the most stable person alive, but there's no need to run him down that way, especially in

front of me. You realize that you're humiliating me by talking about my brother this way?"

"Care to challenge?" Ceil said, smiling devilishly.

"Of course not. Not you, anyway. But don't talk to me like this, huh? Vern's one of the best gunmen alive, and I'm glad to have him in the family. Let's not fight over him."

"My humble apologies, sir," she said formally.

"Accepted. Now let's get home. If I have to second for Vern at seven hundred, we'll have to be ready for Jason Blade's man." It certainly had been a lousy Saturday night.

Blade's man showed up at six the next morning. He was short and rather fat and didn't give the impression of being very fast with a gun. But I never give an opponent the benefit of the doubt. Some of these clumsy-looking boys can move like a gunshot when it comes to reaching for a sidearm.

He introduced himself as Mr. Audly Brettmeier, attorney at law. There was nothing belligerent about him at all. We had a pleasant little chat, without any arguing. The conventional rules were good enough for both of us.

We worked out the timing switch order to the satisfaction of both parties and parted formally. When he left, I found myself rather liking Mr. Brettmeier. He seemed quite gentle.

I took a lift chute to the roof, climbed into my flitter, and flew uptown to Vern's apartment building. He was waiting for me on the landing deck. He got in and I lifted, heading toward Cadwallater's Tavern.

"You sure you don't want to call this thing off, Vern?" I asked.

He looked at me oddly. "Do you feel all right?"

I shrugged. "Second's duty," I said. "I'm supposed to make sure you won't be reconciled."

"Oh, is that it?" he said, grinning. "This is the first time anybody's actually bothered to ask me the question. Formally, the answer is 'no'."

"I thought so," I told him. I wasn't sure what had got into me. Ceil's influence the night before, I guessed.

We landed on Cadwallater's roof and took the drop chute to the basement. Jason Blade and Mr. Brettmeier were already waiting for us. The manager of the tavern

had consented to act as official.

"Are the seconds certain that this quarrel cannot be reconciled and rectified?" he asked crisply. "Will not the offender apologize and the offended accept?"

"No," the two men said together.

The old formulas were rattled off without thought to their meaning. What the hell was eating me? I'd heard those words tossed off that way a good many times. Why worry about it now? Damn Ceil and her moralizing!

"Very well, gentle sirs," said the official. "Stand at your places."

They walked to the circles inset in the plastic floor twenty meters apart. I walked over to Jason Blade and asked for his weapon while Brettmeller did the same with Vern. Then the two of us and the official checked the weapons, reloaded them, and returned them.

The duellers stood with their hands raised to shoulder level, their backs to each other. Vern's face was quietly confident, and, surprisingly enough, the face of Jason Blade showed an impassive self-reliance that was unusual in a Ledwick opponent. I would think that a

man facing an opponent with Vernon's reputation would at least be a little disturbed, but Blade wasn't.

"We will proceed, gentle sirs," said the official. "I am about to cut in the scanners. Ready? Freeze!"

That was to insure simultaneous starting. If either of them moved before the signal now, and the man would be electrostunned before he could draw.

"At the signal, gentles!" The official pressed the autotimer.

Ting! — Ting! — Ting! — Ting! — Ting! —

Five signals spaced half a second apart.

Then:

BONG!

And I saw one of the most incredible bits of gunplay of my life. Jason Blade moved unbelievably fast. His hand snapped toward that pistol and jerked it out of its holster as he turned. Vern hadn't completed his turn yet before Blade's shot slammed into him. It had almost seemed as if Vern had been moving in slow motion.

But he hadn't. He'd been operating at top form. Blade had been blindly, superhumanly fast.

In spite of that, Vern still

had stamina and a sheer will to live, even if it were only for a second more. He brought up his pistol and fired once before he pitched forward on the floor.

The doctor rushed out from the wings to attend the wounded man. He checked Vern's body with a transparency viewer and shook his head.

"Right through the heart and lung," he said. "No hope."

I took a deep breath. It had been over so fast that I still hadn't received the shock. There was, of course, only one gentle thing to do.

I walked over to where Jason Blade was still standing, rubbing his hands after reholstering his pistol.

"I wish to assure you, sir," I said, "that I hold no rancor for what you have done honorably."

He turned to me and nodded his head.

"*Egghhzt-zt-zt*," he said.

He had started to put out his hand, but when he made the odd noise, his eyes opened wide, and he froze for an instant. Then he started to go for his gun.

I was ahead of him. My own sidearm was out and blasting before he could even get his out of the holster.

Jason Blade dropped suddenly to the floor. His eyes were gone.

"*What is this?*" screamed Brettmeller, going for his own gun.

But the official already had his out. "If either of you moves, I'll cut you down."

The doctor had his gun out also. For a minute, the bristling artillery made the room look like an arsenal.

Brettmeller and I eased our weapons back into their holsters.

"Now what is this all about, Mr. Hughes?" asked the official. "I saw Mr. Blade go for his gun, but—"

"It's murder," Brettmeller said. "Deliberate, cold-blooded murder."

I nodded. "I'll say it is, friend. But not the way you're thinking. Doctor, use your transparency on that thing."

The doctor looked at me, frowned, and then bent over the corpse.

I glanced down at the screen, and I saw what I expected to see. Transistors and coils and mnemonic tubes.

"It's a puppet," said the doctor softly.

I looked over at the refreshment table where a single teacup sat steaming on

a saucer. It was going to get cold before anyone drank it.

Half an hour later, we were all in the police monitor's office. One of the cops handed the films of the duel to a lieutenant.

"We got these out of the autotimer before they were destroyed," he said. "Mr. Brettmeller should be commended for thinking of it in time."

I agreed. The film is supposed to be taken during a duel in case there is any dispute afterwards, but it is automatically destroyed fifteen minutes later.

The lieutenant introduced himself. "Gentle sirs, I am John van Pelt. A very serious crime has been committed, and I would like your indulgence while I ask a few questions."

He was a big, light-haired man with a smooth manner and a look of shrewdness in his blue eyes. He turned to me.

"First, Mr. Hughes, would you tell us what made you suspicious?"

"Certainly," I said. "I walked over to him to assure him that I had no hard feelings, and he made the damndest noise you ever heard. Then I saw the dent

in his throat where the plastic had been crushed. Vern's last bullet had hit him there, wrecking the vocal apparatus."

Van Pelt looked at the sheaf of photographs in his hand and nodded. "I see. You reasoned that whoever was at the controls of the puppet didn't realize what had happened."

"Whoever they were, they realized it as soon as the ears picked up the sound," I said. "So I drew and shot out the eyes, which were probably the only vulnerable spot in the head. Naturally, the operator relinquished control immediately, since there was no way to guide the thing after that."

"I see. Excellent reasoning, Mr. Hughes." He looked at the photographs a moment, then glanced up at Brettmeller. "Now I think you had better explain yourself, Mr. Brettmeller."

Brettmeller reached in and took out his cardcase, offering one to the lieutenant. "As you see, I am a registered attorney. Mr. Blade — or, rather, the puppet — called me at my home last night and explained that he was a stranger in town and had had the misfortune to be challenged. He had no friends,

and was therefore forced to call on an attorney."

"Did he tell you how he got your name?"

"Out of the City Directory. I have an advertisement placed with the service."

Van Pelt nodded. "That seems quite in order. We'll have to check, of course."

He started asking the others questions, but I didn't pay too much attention to what they were saying. I was still reacting to the shock of Vern's death. It seemed like such a lousy way to die—a crack shot, fooled by a machine.

Van Pelt finished with the others and turned to me again.

"Since you were the second of the deceased, I assume, naturally, that you will make it a point of honor to find the killer."

"Naturally," I said. There was little else I could say; it was an ironclad obligation on my part.

"Very well," the lieutenant said. "But I suggest that you come to us with any information you uncover. We'll reciprocate, of course, but we'll have to have legal proof. Too many times, someone has gone off in search of a killer and come up with the wrong man. We don't want to have

two murders on our hands."

"Don't worry," I told him, "I'm going to make sure." I meant it. "Where do you intend to start?"

"With the only clue we have," van Pelt said. "The remains of the puppet. We'll let you know what we find out."

Ceil was waiting for me outside the police monitor's office. She was sitting in the driver's seat of my flitter.

"How'd you find out so quick?" I asked.

"The monitor phoned Carl, and Carl phoned me. I took a taxi."

I sat down in the seat beside her. She lifted the flitter into the air.

"I had them phone Carl," I said. "I figured it would be better to have him tell Mara than for some cop to do it."

"Want me to head for Mara's?"

"We'd better, I suppose," I said. I closed my eyes and leaned back in the seat. "This is a stinking mess. It's bad enough to have to face her with Vern dead—but *murder*! It's inconceivable!"

"She deserves it," said Ceil. "It's her own fault for getting him into it. If she wasn't such a tease, she'd—"

"She wasn't flirting with

this guy, get it? This wasn't any kind of guy! This was a robot, deliberately operated by somebody who wanted to kill Vern."

"Still, if Mara didn't act the way she did, it might not have happened."

"She wasn't flirting this time," I said. "I was watching."

"She wasn't? That's the first time, then."

"For Heaven's sake, Ceil! My brother's dead, and you keep raking up old bits of cattiness. Vern was deliberately murdered by someone who didn't dare take his chances in a duel."

"My apologies, gentle sir," she said formally. I dropped the matter right there. We rode on silently for a while, as a few minutes later Ceil brought the flitter down on the landing where I'd picked up Vern at seven that morning. It seemed like days ago.

Carl's flitter was already parked, and Ceil scooted into the space next to it."

As she stepped out, I put my hand on her shoulder.

"Ceil—"

"Yes?"

"Do me a favor? Will you be nice to Mara? At least be quiet."

She tried to smile, but it came out as a lopsided, sar-

donic grin. "It's a funny thing, but I've never said a word to Mara that wasn't perfectly polite. And you know it. After all, I do carry this." She patted her side-arm. "But now you warn me."

"There's no Vern around to challenge you," I pointed out.

Her eyes grew cold. "I do not feel you are being gentle, Mr. Hughes. You know as well as I do that Vern wouldn't have given a damn what I said about Mara. He wouldn't have made himself look silly in a duel with me; he'd have dismissed it the way you did, as cattiness. I never worried about Vern."

"In the second place, Carl is down there now, and he respects my arms. If I were to wise off to Mara, he'd be forced to protect her. Carl's not half as self-assured as Vern was."

"My apologies, gentle lady," I said. "I'm afraid I'm all mixed up. I'm not thinking straight."

She put her hand on mine. "Neither of us is. That's the second time we've come close to being at gunpoint in the last ten minutes."

I nodded. "Come to think of it, we'd both better be on

our toes when we get down there. They're probably jumpier than you and I are."

They were. Carl was pacing up and down the floor of the apartment, and about every third or fourth time he walked by the bar, he'd stop and pour another beer. He had let us in when the announcer identified us, and then dialed in orders that we were not to be disturbed.

Carl went across the room, filled his glass again, walked back to the middle of the room, and stopped. He looked at me.

"What do the police monitors say?"

"They're looking. They'll have to check into the puppet. They've got a lot to do."

"Meanwhile," he said, "what are you going to do?" His voice was accusing.

"There isn't much I can do yet. I haven't anything to work on. But I'm thinking about it. Remember, it's an obligation of honor, aside from the fact that Vern was *my* brother, too. Where's Mara?"

"In her bedroom," he said, glancing at the door. "There is a psychomedic in there with her." He looked back at me. "You're his second. And his brother. You've got to find out who did it. If you

don't, I'll go out looking for myself."

I shook my head. "You'd end up in jail or dead. The cops don't like unauthorized persons getting themselves in jams over police business. Leave it to me; I'll find out who did it." I wasn't sure of that at all, but I had to say something authoritative to keep Carl from being foolish. He was about half tight.

"All right," he said, "but remember: if you don't get on the job, you'll have *me* to answer to."

"Sure, Carl, sure," I said. "You don't have to worry about me. I'll find Vern's murderer."

He looked at me, and behind the drunkenness I knew he was clear-minded and angry. He drained the glass and slammed it to the floor. It bounced ringingly and rolled over into a corner. There was a long silence.

Finally, Carl said: "Who would do it, Denny? And why? And why couldn't they have done it the right way? I could take it if Vern had died honorably—I always expected him to go that way sooner or later—but to be—to be *murdered!*" He closed his eyes tightly and shook his head.

"It's horrible," said a con-

tralto voice. "It's all ghastly, isn't it?" It was Mara.

I turned around and looked at her. She was wearing a bedroom robe and her eyes were red-rimmed and sore, but the robe clung close and the red eyes somehow managed to give extra depth to her beauty. Still, I could tell she had taken Vern's death hard.

"Hello, Mara," I said. "How do you feel?"

"How do you think a brand-new widow should feel, Denny? I haven't heard all the details yet. Is it definitely murder? And what's this about a puppet?"

Evidently, the psycho-medic had calmed her hysteria a bit.

Quickly, I filled her in on everything. She cried a little as I explained the details of Vern's death.

"That's monstrous," she said. "Why would someone do a thing like that? Why couldn't they kill him the fair way? That's the way he would have wanted to die!" Her voice sounded angry.

"I know," I said. "And I'm going to find the man who killed him." I made it a promise.

It sounded noble and impressive, but after I left I

stopped to consider that I had no leads whatsoever.

I took the flutter home. I dropped Ceil at her place, kissed her, and tried to smile when she wished me luck. I knew I'd have to get this murder business cleared up before Ceil and I could do anything about taking out a companionate agreement.

But where did I start?

Vernon had been killed by a puppet. Fine. The puppet had been operated by remote control; the man with whom Vernon had duelled had been sitting comfortably miles away, in no great danger as he fought. The killer was someone who didn't have the guts to get out and risk his neck.

There weren't more than three or four thousand suspects. Both Carl and I stood to inherit plenty from him. Anyone close to Vern could have done it. But it wasn't me, and it couldn't have been Carl, since he had been right there at the table when the challenge was made. He couldn't have been operating the puppet.

What seemed most likely to me was that a relative of one of Vern's numerous opponents had decided to get even. But which one? Where to start?

I reached for the phone and called Lieutenant van Pelt. His heavy-jawed face filled the screen.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hughes."

"Hello, Lieutenant. Any leads yet?"

"Possibly. How about you?"

"I'm considering the idea of investigating the relatives of Vern's opponents," I said. "But there are so damned many of them!"

"You're telling me," said van Pelt. "I've got the list right in front of me. So far, we've figured a hundred and sixty-two suspects, including anyone fast enough on the draw to be able to shoot Vernon Ledwick by way of puppet. It's only fair to tell you that the list includes Carl Ledwick."

"Carl? He didn't kill Vern! He couldn't. He was right there when the affront was made."

"I didn't say he did it, Mr. Hughes. I just said he was on the list. It's a big list. You're on it, too."

"Me? Listen, van Pelt—"

"We haven't made any formal accusations," the lieutenant cut in, smiling. "We haven't accused anyone. Don't get insulted, please. I'd hate to have to fight duels

with a hundred and sixty-two people. The only reason I told you was to show you that we're giving the case careful consideration."

"All right," I said. "What else do you know?"

"We've got a lead for you to follow. We can't touch it ourselves until we're positive, but you can make a stab at it on what little we've got. Just don't get yourself killed."

"What is it?"

"The puppet. It was a secretly made job, of course. It's illegal to imitate human beings. There aren't any identifying marks on it at all. But, from a detailed study of the internal construction, we're pretty sure that it was made by either *General Robotics* or *Fedderman Remote Control*. We have no proof, but if you want to try it, that's your business."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Good luck," he said, and cut off.

So they suspected me, eh? I didn't like even the vague idea of it, but it showed that they were on their toes. Of course, I knew they damn well weren't going to solve that crime. Oh, no. It was all up to me.

I knew the police record on murders; about four out of

a hundred. The police are like anyone else; they can only back up their authority with guns. And accusing a man of murder is an insult worthy of a challenge. The cops don't accuse anyone until they have absolute proof that they know will hold up in court.

I didn't envy them their job. They had to probe too deeply for clues. They had to find out things which weren't gentle to find out. Trouble was, they rarely did so.

So I had to do it all myself. Van Pelt and his crew did the best they could, but the best isn't very much.

I thought over what van Pelt had said about the puppet. Either *General Robotics* or *Fedderman*. He was playing it cagey. He knew that GR didn't do that kind of work; GR was too big. It could only be a little outfit like Fedderman. But van Pelt hadn't been silly enough to say so, even to me.

When Fedderman opened Monday morning, I was going to be there. Asking lots of questions.

Fedderman was a little fellow with great scraggly eyebrows and a twisted bit of a smile. He was wearing a shabby lab smock and was busy over some schematics

when his assistant let me into his office.

He looked up at me with his twisted smile. "Yes, please?"

"I'm thinking of buying a puppet," I said. "I'd like to see what you have on hand. I have a special job in mind, but I'd like to take a look at your control systems before I commit myself."

He stood up and wiped his palms on his smock. "Ah, yes. Did you have something of a precision nature in mind?"

"Yes," I said. "Very precision stuff."

"Come," he said, beckoning to me and his assistant.

I followed him into a back room which had obviously been set up for demonstration purposes. On one side was a desk-high box from which protruded the head, shoulders, and arms of a shiny, chromium-plated robot. On the other side were the operating controls. Between the two lay a cable the size of my wrist.

He led me over to the control panel and said: "Sit down, sir. Let me help you with the control adjustments."

A helmet went down over my eyes, and my hands went into a pair of metallic gloves.

The assistant adjusted them carefully.

"Now, I will turn it on," said Fedderman. There was a click, and suddenly I could see again. But now I was looking out through the eyes of the robot across the room.

"Wiggle your fingers," Fedderman said. "Move your hands."

I did so, and I had the eerie sensation of watching the metal arms in front of my eyes move the same way. It was as though I were actually *in* the robot.

"Now here is a nice feature," the little man went on. He removed the helmet from my head. "If there are a set of motions which must be done time after time, without variation, the puppet has a recording apparatus."

He pushed another switch. "Now, move your hands. Do something. That's it. Now watch." He moved the switch in the other direction. The hands on the shiny robot across the room moved just as I had moved my hands.

"Your motions are recorded on tape," explained Fedderman, "and can be replayed back at any time."

I pulled my hands out of the metal gloves. "That's very good," I said, "but I

want something a little more complicated."

His eyes brightened under the scraggly brows. "Of course, sir. Naturally, the price would be higher, but in precision work..." His voice trailed off as he spread his hands. "What sort of machine did you have in mind?"

"Well," I began, "in the first place, I want one without cables; remote control. And I want a complete mannikin—"

I went on and described Jason Blade, right down to the polish on his fingernails. And as I talked, Fedderman's smile faded slowly into nothingness. But, oddly enough, the smile seemed to have been transferred to his assistant, who beamed and nodded brightly.

"That's very similar to the one we did last week," said the assistant helpfully.

Fedderman flashed him a look of pure hatred. "The boy's mistaken," he said. "We don't do jobs of that sort. He's thinking of a display dummy we did for Gimbel-Macy's."

If it weren't for the clever boy standing there looking as though he had just eaten a canary and then found it was poisoned, I'd have left and

tried *General Robotics*. But I knew who'd turned out Jason Blade now.

I frowned and persisted. "It seems to me it could be done," I said.

"We don't do that sort of thing, Mr.—" He paused.

"Hughes," I said quietly. "Dennis Hughes. Vernon Ledwick was my brother."

He looked a little startled. "Oh, yes," he said. "Please accept my sympathies. A terrible tragedy."

I thought it over. Fedderman didn't look like much of a gunfighter, but I didn't care to get involved in more trouble by giving him offense. After struggling for the proper phrasing for a moment, I said: "Begging your pardon, gentle sir, but my brother's death places a heavy obligation on me. I feel that there might be some possible lead I could obtain here—not implying any complicity on your part, of course," I added cautiously.

Fedderman scowled, but he looked uneasy, and I knew I had him. He was afraid I might challenge *him* if he didn't come across, now that his hand had been tipped. I pressed my advantage.

"If it wouldn't inconvenience you," I said politely, "would it be possible for me

to examine your records of recent weeks?"

His scowl became blacker, but he said: "Look, Mr. Hughes—just keep my name out of this and I'll tell you what you want to know. But keep my name out of this, will you?"

"Of course," I said. "What do you know about the puppet Jason Blade?"

"Fetch me my file book," he told the assistant. "And get that Ledwick letter out of recent correspondence."

The assistant brought the book. Fedderman examined it for a moment, then looked up at me. "The Jason Blade puppet was built and delivered last week—no, check that. We built it last week, but it was delivered Friday."

Friday. The challenge had been made Saturday, and Vern had been murdered Sunday morning. It was now Monday.

I squinted at Fedderman. "Can you tell me who ordered the puppet? I mean, if it's not a breach of personal ethics—"

"This should amuse you," Fedderman said. "The puppet was ordered by your brother. Vernon Ledwick."

It took me a second or two to react, and a couple more

to recover from my double take. *Vernon* had ordered the damned thing?

"Here's the proof," said *Fedderman*. He handed me a letter.

It was neatly typed on *Vern's* stationery, with either *Vern's* signature or a damned good electronic duplication thereof at the bottom. I read it.

It was an order for a puppet, the specifications roughly matching the appearance of *Jason Blade*. *Vern* had said he wanted the puppet "for a prank" he planned to play on us. He enclosed a check to cover costs. It was to be delivered at his office Friday.

I looked at the letter, then at *Fedderman*. He didn't seem happy, but it looked like he hadn't been lying to me. I read the letter again, and then a third time.

"I'm afraid this is all the time I can spare, Mr. Hughes. And—I do hope this will be the last I hear of this unpleasant affair."

"Don't worry," I said. I thanked him and left.

Out in the street, I thought about the letter some more. It was all completely crazy; it didn't make one little bit of sense.

Vern had ordered the puppet? Hell, no. Despite the

stationery, despite the signature, despite everything, I couldn't believe that. Perhaps I could accept the fact that it was an elaborate stunt had it ended Saturday night, but then there had been the sequel Sunday morning. Could it have been a prank that had gone wrong? I doubted it. *Vern* wasn't much of a jokester, nor did he seem like the kind who'd conceive such an elaborate method of suicide.

No. *Fedderman* hadn't been lying when he showed me the letter. But *Vernon Ledwick* hadn't written it.

I caught a flitter and headed downtown to *Vern's* office. *Fedderman* had said the puppet had been delivered there, Friday. That was phony too. *Vern* had been off on a business trip Friday, and his one-man office had been closed.

I had a key. *Carl* had a key. *Vern* had a key. So far as I knew, we were the only people who did.

Who was there to accept the puppet set when *Fedderman* delivered it?

Or did *Fedderman* deliver it at all?

As the lift chute took me to the 57th floor of the building where *Vern's* office was,

I wondered if anybody at all in this high-minded society of ours ever told the truth about anything.

I hadn't come to any conclusions by the time I turned the corridor and reached the door. In glowing letters were the words, *Vernon Ledwick, Special Consultant*. I hoped none of his clients were going to be upset when the deals he was promoting for them fell through.

I took out my key and pressed it to the door. Its molecular pattern registered with the door mechanism and the lock clicked. I turned the handle and walked in.

There was no sign of any control set in the bare little room. The day's mail lay in the receiving basket where the automatic pneumotubes had shot it.

I looked around. I could see that the desk and cabinets had been moved around somewhat. I checked the extent of the moving.

It was just enough to make room for the bulk that was the control set of a puppet.

So Fedderman had delivered the thing here, after all! I frowned. It had been here, but it wasn't here now.

The enthusiasm that had generated in me when I cornered Fedderman suddenly

evaporated. The new data I had made things confused beyond belief. Vern's probably-forged letter and the business about the office eliminated most of van Pelt's 162 suspects, since they wouldn't know anything about Vern's office. That left only the immediate group around him.

I was up against a wall. It couldn't have been anyone who was present at the time the challenge was delivered, because the murderer was here at the office operating the puppet.

Or could it have been tape operated? No. A tape operation would have to be preset. And a tape couldn't have known exactly what was going to happen at the bar or be able to know what Vernon was going to say. Unless Vernon really was in on it. No, even that didn't make sense. A tape-run robot wouldn't have known exactly where Mara would be sitting. The puppet had been run by a human being, all right.

What was I supposed to do? For a moment I felt very, very unhappy about the whole thing. I wanted to throw it all back into van Pelt's inefficient hands and let him worry about it. He could pin the rap on me, for all I cared.

I stooped and picked up the

mail. There wasn't much—just two or three things that looked like bills, a small magazine, and an envelope that felt strangely heavy. It seemed as if there was a coin in it.

I shook it, my curiosity aroused. Sure enough, there was a heavy metal object within. I felt it. It wasn't any coin; it was long and rectangular and felt suspiciously like a *key*.

I dropped the other letters back in the receiver and thoughtfully pocketed the envelope with the key in it. I didn't especially care to go about robbing the mails, but a clue is a clue.

It made interesting reading when I steamed it open. There was a key inside, all right. It was the key to Vern's office. With it was a little note.

Chicago

Sunday, September 11

Dear Mr. Ledwick:

Am returning herewith the key to your office, as requested. This is to confirm that I received payment as planned; the check was in the desk drawer as you had said, and I found the payment more than ample.

The skit was extemporaneous, but it went over quite well, don't you think?

Trusting my work was satisfactory, and that my handling of the puppet met your specifications, I remain, gentle sir, your faithful servant,

Robert Yardley,

Free-lance Expediter.

I read it a couple of times. Curiouser and curiouser, I thought. Numerous questions came up. So Vernon had hired a free-lance expeditor to operate his puppet? That tangled things even further. It gave rise to the possibility that Fedderman had been completely correct, that Vern *had* actually ordered the puppet himself and hired a man to operate.

But what about Sunday morning? Had Yardley been running the puppet during the duel? The letter was postmarked Chicago, but that didn't mean anything. Yardley could very well have been back in Chicago by noon Sunday.

And who the hell was Yardley? A free-lance expeditor. Why would he kill Vern?

Or was he just expediting the murder for someone else?

Someone who was on the scene at the time?

I wondered just how obliging this expediter was. I grabbed the tube for Chicago as fast as I could, and set about to hunt up Robert Yardley, free-lance expediter.

It was after eleven when I hit Chicago. I had to switch trains at Lakeside Station; the address on the letter was on the far South Side, down near Peoria.

Rather than hunt all over hell and gone for a strange address, I got an airtaxi which set me down on the roof landing of a strictly second-class apartment building.

I took the drop chute to the eighteenth floor and walked down the hall to Room 1834.

The glow-sign on the door said:

*Robert Yardley
Free-Lance Expediter*

I covered the announcer plate with my hand and waited for a moment while the scanner took a good look at me. The door swung open.

"Come in, gentle sir," said a voice.

The room was equipped as a small office, but I suspected

that the door to my right led to an apartment. It looked like the kind of place where a man might live and work at the same time.

There was a big desk in the middle of the room. The man sitting behind it was in his middle fifties, at a guess, but he still looked hard and fast with a gun. His face was lean and lantern-jawed, and was wreathed in a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Mr. Yardley?" I asked.

"Yes, sir, I am. What may I do for you?"

"My name is Dennis Hughes," I told him.

His face didn't move; there wasn't even the slightest twitch of recognition in his eyes. But I knew better. He had seen me at the party Saturday night through the electronic eyes of Jason Blade. He knew my name, and he knew me.

"How can I help you, Mr. Hughes?" He was still smiling pleasantly.

I figured I might as well let him have it with a full charge. "Did you know that Vernon Ledwick was killed Sunday morning by a puppet named Jason Blade?"

This time, there was a faint flicker, but it was soon covered by a look of puzzled

sadness. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

"Why?" I asked, keeping my voice cool. "You were operating the puppet."

His face lost all expression and became deadly. He stood up slowly, his hand only a few inches from his hip.

"If you are accusing me of murder," he said, "I would like to hear you repeat it. Surely my ears deceive me."

My own hand was not quite touching my gun butt. "If you heard me accuse you of murder, sir, then your ears do indeed deceive you. I did not, I think, say *when* you operated the puppet."

Neither one of us moved.

The long silence went on and on. Finally Yardley smiled and said, "You know it's a breach of privacy even to ask me—or accuse me—of operating the puppet at any time. I don't know a thing about it."

"I have a note you wrote to Vernon Ledwick that says different," I said. "Look, Yardley, I'm not looking for a fight. I'm just trying to find out who killed my brother, and you can help me."

"I don't like probbers," Yardley said. "The jobs I handle are confidential."

"Of course," I said. "But

you don't seem to realize that there's something more involved in this."

Yardley drummed on the edge of his desk idly. Finally he stood up. "Let's go into the next room—my living room. I'd feel more relaxed there. I want to discuss this with you."

He led me through the door into a fairly nicely-furnished little room, complete with bar and taperecorder. He mixed a couple of drinks—he didn't have an automatic dialer, I noted—and turned on the recorder.

A gaggle of sound like a convention of angry ducks came out of the machine. He grinned.

"Sorry," he said. "Wrong speed." He did something to one of the controls and the pitch and speed of the sound dropped until it became recognizable as music. He turned the volume down low, swung himself into a couch, and faced me.

"Now," he said. "Let's talk."

"Fair enough. The way I see it, you received an order from someone to operate a puppet Saturday night. The order was signed by Vernon Ledwick. Whether or not he actually wrote the order is a

different story. You operated your puppet, returned to Chicago, and Sunday morning you mailed the key to Ledwick's office—your headquarters while you operated the puppet—back to Ledwick. Sunday morning the puppet killed Ledwick."

Yardley nodded. "You're very ingenious," he said. "It's a totally convincing picture of what I might have been doing this week-end."

"Play it square," I said. "Let's face it: the note I have could incriminate you. It certainly puts you up front among the top suspects."

"Questionable," he said. "It doesn't prove I was really there, you know."

"Let the police worry about that. I don't think you did it; I just want you to confirm what I just said."

"All right," Yardley said. "I'll play it square, then." He went over to a cabinet and pulled out a letter. He handed it to me.

It was similar to the one Fedderman had; it instructed him to carry on the little play in the night club Saturday night, enclosed a check, and gave him instructions in great detail. It was signed, *Vernon Ledwick*.

I handed it back. "When did you get this?"

"About a week ago. I've done work for Ledwick before, you know, and I figured there was no harm in taking on this little joke for him. I was the fellow who pushed him into the challenge. Don't ask me what it was all about; I was just playing a part. I saw you there that night. Nice little girl you have."

"Thanks," I said dryly. "What did you do Sunday?"

"Mailed back the key and went to sleep. I have my ticket here, in case you're interested. I came back on the two Ayem tube after playing the show at Cadwalleter's. I don't know who was running the puppet Sunday morning, but it wasn't me."

I frowned. "Where'd you operate from?"

"As you said. Ledwick's office."

"What did you do with the control set, then?"

"I left it there," he said. "Right there in the office."

"Ummm. Okay," I said. "I'll take your word for it."

"You'd damned better well do just that," said Yardley, suddenly menacing again. "I don't want to get mixed up in this business. I've always played a straight game, and I don't want any law trouble at this stage of my career."

"Okay," I said. "Fine. As

far as this case is concerned, you're out of it completely."

That wasn't exactly true. Yardley was still on my list of suspects, though not too high. He *might* have been the man running the puppet on Sunday, but I doubted it. No motive, no holes in his story, and he didn't seem like the sort who'd murder a man just for a few bucks.

There was nothing more to do in Chicago, so I took the tube back to New York.

I wanted to talk to Brettmeller. The pudgy attorney wouldn't be happy at being dragged into the case—no one was. But, hell, I didn't like it, either.

Brettmeller was in his office, too, which gave me a twinge of conscience. I ought to be in my own office, designing spaceship interiors instead of chasing all over the United States looking for a killer. Damn Vern and his hot temper, anyway!

The girl in the outer office wasn't wearing a sidearm, so I said, "Tell Mr. Brettmeller that Dennis Hughes wants to see him."

She did, and told me I could go on into the inner office.

"How are you, Mr. Hughes?" he said. "Have you

found out anything more about this terrible affair?"

"I seem to be going around in circles," I told him. "I was wondering if you could give me some information."

He waved me to a chair and sat down on a sofa across the room from me.

"I'll be glad to help, if I can," he said. "Oh, and by the way, I should like to tender my apologies for drawing on you yesterday morning."

I shrugged. "Think nothing of it. I would have done the same. You had no way of knowing your man was a puppet."

"Thank you. Now, what was it you wanted to know?"

"I'm not sure, exactly," I admitted. "I'm up a tree. But I just happened to remember that you were the only one we know of who actually had any extended conversation with Jason Blade. What kind of a man was he? How did he act?"

Brettmeller put a cigarette in his mouth and puffed it alight while he looked at the ceiling. Finally, he said: "I'm not sure I know how to phrase this, Mr. Hughes, because I'm not sure what I mean." He paused a moment, considering. "Let's put it this way: I didn't particularly like Mr. Jason Blade.

There was something in his manner that was—shall we say—vaguely repellent. I can't place it, exactly, but his mannerisms, his whole bearing, seemed distasteful."

"He didn't act like a gentleman? I'm surprised you took the case."

Brettmeller shook his head. "No, I don't mean he didn't mind his manners; that wasn't it. But he behaved as though he were not used to being a gentleman—as though he knew how to act, but it wasn't natural to him."

"That doesn't help much," I said. "Can you remember anything specific that struck you as odd?"

The attorney thought a moment, and then shook his head. "Not a thing. He just had a peculiar air about him, that's all. As I said, I can't place it; I just felt it."

"Well, just exactly what happened?"

Brettmeller told me as best he could remember. Blade had made an appointment late Saturday night by phoning the attorney's home. Then he'd explained the details, paid the fee in advance, and left. Nothing to it. Perfectly natural.

Brettmeller was no help at

all. I thanked him and left.

Where to next? Every lead I'd run into had turned out to lead nowhere. Well, there might be another lead at Vern's office, so I headed there.

It was only a few blocks, so I walked it and took the lift chute up to his floor.

His office was full of cops.

The monitor at the door told Lieutenant van Pelt that I was waiting to see him, and the lieutenant let me in. Carl was there with him.

"Have you found out anything yet?" Carl asked before van Pelt could say a word.

"Not a thing," I told him. "What are you looking for?"

"I asked your brother to let me look around here," the lieutenant said. "We thought we might turn up something. Specifically, we were wondering if he'd left any final message in case of his death."

"I told them they were crazy," Carl said.

I agreed with him. "Not Vern," I said. "He no more thought he'd get killed in a duel than he thought he'd turn into an elephant."

"It seems you were right," van Pelt said. "Unless he put it in his private files."

"If that's a hint," I told him, "the answer is 'No.' Those files are Carl's busi-

ness and mine. Meddling with them would be an invasion of privacy."

"My apologies," the monitor said smoothly. "I did not mean to suggest that we should look into them. I was going to ask you to look for a statement of some kind."

I glanced at Carl. "Will you do that?" I asked. "I've got some other things to do."

"Sure, Denny." He didn't seem as angry at the world as he had Sunday.

I took a quick look around the office, but there was nothing that told me anything.

The lieutenant sat down in a chair while Carl started going through the files. I walked out in the corridor and took the lift chute to the roof. I signalled a cab and headed for Vern's home.

There were a lot of things bothering me. Who had used the puppet controls in the office Sunday morning? How had they gotten Vern's key? Where had they put the control box? Things kept getting more confusing every time I looked at the facts.

Three minutes later, I was letting myself into Vern's apartment. I had signalled on the announcer, but there was no answer, so I assumed that Mara wasn't home.

There was nothing in the living room, so I went into the study. Just as I stepped through the door, the phone buzzed.

I answered it, and Ceil's face blinked onto the screen. She looked a little startled to see me, then she smiled. "Is Mara there, Denny?"

I shook my head. "No. Why?"

"She is still all broken up; I thought I might be able to—well, comfort her."

"Oh?" It didn't sound at all like Ceil.

"She called me up this afternoon to ask where Carl was. She'd tried his home and couldn't get him, and she thought maybe I knew. I didn't. But she seemed so overwrought that—that I just couldn't help feeling sorry for her."

"I don't know where she is," I told her. "By the way, would you do me a favor?"

"If I can."

"Carl's over at Vern's office looking through the files. He's outnumbered by cops. I'd appreciate it if you'd drop over there to help him protect his interests. He might need an extra gun around if one of those cops starts getting wise."

She nodded. "I'll be glad to."

I thanked her and cut the circuit.

But it started me wondering. Where was Mara? If something was wrong—

I walked out of the study and went over to her section of the apartment. I signalled on the door announcer for nearly a minute. No answer. I called her name. Still no answer.

I debated with myself on whether I ought to go in, then decided against it. A man doesn't go into an unarmed woman's rooms unannounced. Men have died for less than that.

I went back to the study and started prowling. I went over everything, taking my time about it, hoping I'd find something that would give me just one little clue to Vern's killer. And I didn't find a thing until I came to the letter drop on the desk.

Beside it were the letters that had been in Vern's office that morning. Vern had a timing gadget on his drop at the office; if the letters weren't picked up by noon, a relay automatically rerouted them to his home. They had all been opened.

I picked up the envelopes and pulled out the letters one by one and read them. They didn't mean a thing to me;

they were all business stuff, and none of it seemed to be related to Vern's death in the least.

Then, all of a sudden, I got it.

It was like being hit in the head with a hammer. All the pieces seemed to fall into place like bricks falling into a well.

I dropped the letters and ran across the apartment to the door of Mara's section. I didn't even bother to signal; I just pushed the opener and walked in. I looked around the sitting room. Mara was nowhere to be seen. I walked on into the bedroom. It was empty.

The puppet control box was in the bathroom, where no one, not even the police monitors, would ever think of searching for it.

I looked the thing over, and I was about to switch it on when Mara's voice came from behind me.

"Don't try to draw, Dennis. I'm holding a gun at your back."

I turned around slowly, keeping my hands well away from my hips.

"It looks like I got here just in time," she said coolly. She was holding a deadly-looking Bentley 30 pointed

straight between my eyes. The bore of the barrel looked big enough to crawl into.

"I can kill you, you know," she said. "And I'll not even have to explain why. You're in my bedroom—in fact, you're in my bathroom." Then she held out her hand. "You must have the key. Give it to me."

I started to lower my hand.

"Slowly," she said. The gun didn't waver, and I knew she could kill me before I had a chance to draw. I took the key to Vern's office out of my pocket and held it out to her just as she asked.

"Drop it," she said.

I dropped it. She knelt down and picked it up carefully, without once taking her eyes or the gun off me.

"How did you ever figure it was me, Dennis?" she asked conversationally.

I knew then that she meant to kill me. She wanted to know how I'd found her out so she could cover up afterwards. I decided I'd better stall her along.

"I'll have to admit you were pretty clever," I said as a lead-in. A woman won't shoot a man who's flattering her until he's through.

"You hired a guy to insult you Saturday night, and then brought the control box

here so that you could kill Vern Sunday morning.

"I should have known that night that it was a put-up job. Jason Blade was good-looking and smooth. And yet, you never gave him a tumble. For once in your life, you weren't the cause of the fight. That wasn't true to character, Mara."

She grinned dangerously. "Go on."

"I didn't suspect you, because I knew you couldn't draw that fast. It didn't dawn on me until a few minutes ago that the draw was too fast to be quite human. You recorded the draw-and-fire sequence on tape, doing it slowly. Then, when the time came for the duel, you walked the puppet over to the spot and put the hands up to the shoulders. After that, it was simple. You had the tape ready to run through the pickup and had set the speed control up. As soon as the signal gong rang, the tape ran through, and the robot went through the same actions, only faster.

"I should have figured that out, too. When the robot squawked, I outdrew him. By that time you were in control again, and you couldn't draw fast enough.

"I didn't think about the

speeded-up tape until I heard a man do the same thing by accident this morning."

"How did you know it was me, though?"

"Just luck, really. If I hadn't found the letter from that expediter in Chicago, I wouldn't have known that the person who made the pass wasn't the same as the person who did the killing. If I hadn't found that out, it would have eliminated you automatically, the way you figured it would.

"Brettmeller was the only one who noticed anything, and even he couldn't tell me why he disliked Jason Blade. It was because you were operating the puppet, and you're a woman. You were trying to act like a man, but there were little feminine actions that came through, just the same.

"But it still would have worked if I hadn't found the key and the letter. You had to give the key to Yardley, so he could get into Vern's office Saturday night. But you had to get it back, too. You had him mail it back, using Vern's name. You knew that the mail would come to you right after noon today. You must have been pretty frantic when you

couldn't find the key in the mail. That's why you ripped open all the envelopes looking for it. You *had* to have Vern's key back."

I was just about talked out, and the gun hadn't moved a millimeter.

"Where is the letter?" she asked. "The one from Yardley."

I shook my head. "Even if you kill me, you may be traced through that letter. I'd be a damn fool to say anything."

"I'll take that chance," she said. "I'll find it."

Her finger started to tighten on the trigger. There was only one thing to do. I dropped to a crouch and jumped towards her. The weapon went off just over my head.

I slammed into her, and she staggered back through the door to the bedroom. Her hand came down, and the gun clouted me on the side of the head.

It wasn't enough to knock me out, but I was groggy for a second or two. She was still off balance, and I had enough presence of mind to slam the door between us before she could take aim again.

I locked it and stood there shaking my head, trying to clear it. I knew she wouldn't

try to fire through a steel door.

Impasse. I didn't dare open the door, and she didn't dare leave.

I walked back to the door. "Why did you kill him?" I asked. "Having a cheap love affair somewhere? Or did you just want his money?"

Silence.

"You ought to get what's coming to you, sister. Vern treated you like a queen. He risked his life eleven times for you. He—"

"He treated me like dirt! He hated women who carried a weapon. He didn't want a citizen as a wife, he wanted a namby-pamby who would jump when he said jump. I couldn't go anywhere unless he took me out. I couldn't talk to anyone without his permission. I wasn't supposed to have a mind of my own.

"Sure he risked his life for me. But it wasn't because he loved me; it was because he *owned* me. I didn't flirt with men because they were good-looking. I tried to pick the men who were best with a sidearm.

"But I failed."

And then another voice came through the door.

"Put down the gun, Mara."

There were two shots.

Then the new voice said: "Is that you in there, Dennis?"

It was Ceil.

"It's me. How did you manage to arrive in the nick of time?"

She pointed to the floor where Mara lay. "Mara was down at Vern's office when I got there. She was looking all over for something, pretending to help Carl."

"I know," I said. I told her about the letter.

I knelt down to look at Mara. She was still breathing; Ceil had only smashed her shoulder with the bullet.

"She left in such a state of nerves," Ceil went on, "that I thought maybe I'd better come over here and see what was the matter. The door was open a crack, and I heard what she said about killing Vern. So I sneaked in and got the drop on her. She was a fool to try to shoot me."

I stood up, wiping the sweat from my hands.

"Ceil," I said, "when we're married, if you ever get tired of me, just let me know and I'll leave peacefully. I don't want to have to outshoot a souped-up robot."

She grinned. "Don't worry. If I ever get that sore, you won't have to outshoot anyone but me."

THE END

REVOLT OF THE SYNTHETICS

By RALPH BURKE

You've built an android and turned it out by the thousands to harvest your grain and do your work. Subservience is the keynote of this model. But it revolts and threatens to annihilate you. Can you find the error in time to save your own life?

THE androids were lying down on the job. That was Dave Thornton's first thought, as he rounded the bend and came to the grain-fields. Suddenly, the neat report he had filed that morning was worthless, as were all his evaluations. A current of anger throbbed through him.

He paused for a moment at the edge of the road, blinking with surprise. The androids, sure enough, were lying in the field, stretching their golden-yellow plastic bodies out with lazy content.

It didn't figure. It didn't figure at all—and it left him in a hell of a mess. Thornton broke into a trot and dashed out into the field, scattering the newly-cut haystacks every which way as he ran.

He stopped at the first android he came across, reached down, and jerked the synthetic man up.

"Why aren't you working?" Thornton demanded. "Who ordered you to take a rest?"

"No one ordered us, boss-man," the android said slowly. "We just thought it was time for a little break."

"So we sat down," chimed in another android, coming up from one side. "From now on we only work when we want to."

Thornton looked uneasily from one android to another. He was there supposedly only as an observer, to determine the relative superiority of the synthetic androids over the metallic robots on the farmlands of Kybor. So far the test had gone splendidly, with

the crew of androids far outstripping in production the robots they were replacing. But now this sudden reversal had come, and it looked as though he were going to get involved—and dangerously.

The androids were gathering in a little clump around him, and their bland yellow faces showed expressions of menace. Thornton backed away a step.

"Just what's going on here?" he asked coldly, wishing he'd been smart enough to pack a blaster.

"You heard us the first time," said one of the androids. "It's a new policy we're instituting — effective now."

"But you have no right to do any such thing! I'm ordering you to get back to work!"

None of them moved.

"That's a direct order from a human being," Thornton said. "You can't disobey it!"

One of the androids chuckled. "Oh, can't we?" The android reached out and nudged Thornton roughly in the chest. "Who says?"

Not believing this could be happening, Thornton shoved the android's arm away from himself. It was incredible to suppose that the placid, carefully-trained androids could

be capable of refusing a direct human order.

The android pushed him again. Thornton angrily slapped the cool hand away, and suddenly felt a fist in his teeth.

He lashed out with a right and landed it, hard, on the androids rubbery jaw; the android went rocking back, and another took its place. Thornton looked around and saw that he was in the middle of a semicircle of jeering androids. It was like a dream, being attacked by these subservient creatures.

Thornton pulled the nearest one toward him, hurled it backward into the semicircle, and at the same moment felt a stinging blow on the back of his neck.

He whirled, took a grazing punch on his cheek, and drove a fist into the android's stomach. Then, before any further trouble could develop, he broke through the ring and dashed across the field to his tractor.

The androids didn't pursue; Thornton looked back and saw them laughing uproariously to themselves, as they once again stretched out comfortably on the ground in the warm midday sun.

He drove grimly back to the



The steel-muscled arms hurled him backward.

Administration House with the derisive cries of the androids still echoing in his ears. It had all happened too suddenly for his mind to assimilate the situation properly, and all he could think was that a pleasant, soft job had suddenly turned into a nightmare.

Thornton and his wife had come to Kybor, a small, agricultural planet in the Procyon system, a month before. He had been hired by the Donovan Food Cartel to study the practicality of replacing the farming robots with the newly-developed synthetic androids. During the test period, Thornton and his wife had been installed in the home of Ed Chesley, the local Planetary Supervisor, who was the only Earthman on the planet permanently. It was Chesley's job to see to it that the grain was shipped out; he had the little planet to himself.

Things had rolled along smoothly for three weeks, with the androids, intelligent, almost-human beings, learning the farm routines fantastically fast and turning in almost double the yield the old clanking robots had. So far it looked like a clear victory for the android manufacturers, and an overwhelming setback for the robotics boys—for if

Thornton's report ruled in favor of androids, the Donovan Cartel would make the changeover on all of its galaxy-wide holdings.

Thornton had started writing the report that morning, praising the androids and comparing them favorably to the robots, whose control farm was doing poorly. But suddenly, for no comprehensible reason, the cooperative androids had ceased being cooperative.

To top everything, Supervisor Chesley, seeing that everything was so well in hand, had left the night before for a short business trip to Denaron, the neighboring planet in the system. So Thornton and his wife were alone on Kybor, and the androids were in revolt.

It was a sorely-worried Dave Thornton who jogged up the steps of the Administration House in search of his wife.

He ran inside, bolting the door behind him. The first voice he heard was that of the house-robot, a clinking, seven-foot heap of tin who did menial tasks.

"Where's your mistress?" Thornton asked.

The robot slowly opened its mouth and rumbled, in halt-

ing syllables, "She is upstairs."

Without waiting for any more information, Thornton raced up the stairs to the second floor of the big house. Nina's probably in the micro-film library, he thought, and upon entering the darkened room he found he was right. She was sitting attentively in the back, watching a reel of some old Earth novel. She really went for them.

Startled at the intrusion, Nina looked up. Then she saw Thornton's battered appearance.

"What happened, darling? What ever—"

Hastily, he told her the whole story—how the androids refused to work, how they were growing violent when he had made his escape.

He watched her, saw her face change, take on a look of blank incomprehension. Nina had had a pleasant life; she came from a rich merchant family, and he had met her while she was vacationing on one of the pleasure-worlds of the Arcturus system. Thornton's job was a good one, and their life had been an uncomplicated, happy one—until now.

"But they can't rebel," she protested. "They're supposed

to respect humans. They're *conditioned!*"

"Someone must have unconditioned them," Thornton said tightly. "Those androids have been tampered with. They wouldn't change so radically overnight for absolutely no reason!"

"But who would do such a thing?"

"Don't be naive, darling. Who do you think might have a motive for wrecking the android test?"

Nina, puzzled, shrugged her shoulders. "Who?"

"Who else but the robot manufacturers, of course," Thornton said.

The answer had occurred to him a moment before, as he had revolved the situation in his mind. There was no reason why the peaceful androids should suddenly take things into their own synthetic hands, unless some interested party had manipulated them. And the logical villains would be the robot manufacturers, struggling to maintain their industry in the face of the overwhelming competition from the new android marketers.

But how? How?

He walked over to the window, staring out moodily, as if looking for the answer out there. Nina was busily gath-

ering up the microfilms and putting them away.

Somehow the robot makers had smuggled an agent onto Kybor, to tinker with the androids. Thornton angrily determined that he was going to find that agent.

He glanced out at the dusty road, and then took a sharper look. Yes—he'd been right at first glance. An army of androids was tramping merrily up the road, waving flails and shovels, singing wildly. Some of them were carrying torches.

A moment later, the house was surrounded.

They were singing, "We don't have to work! We don't have to work!" *Like children*, Thornton thought. *Children on vacation from school.*

Nina was sobbing quietly in the corner. "Why'd we come here, Dave? Why couldn't we have taken that other job? The one on Earth?"

"Quiet, baby," Thornton said, concealing his impatience with her. He knew he had to be gentle; poor spoiled Nina had never been under any sort of strain before in her life, and she was reacting predictably.

The androids were pounding on the walls below,

marching around, having a generally good time of it. They didn't seem particularly malicious yet, but they had Thornton holed up and they were determined to make the most of it, apparently. And those torches were a potential menace.

The only way to save things was to find out what had been done to the androids, and counteract it. That would mean some fast talking, and perhaps some speedy running as well.

Uneasily, he walked across the hall to his own room, and dropped down at his desk. His report was open in front of him, and he smiled ironically at the words of praise he had written about the androids that morning. He pushed the sheet away.

He couldn't go outside, not in that raging mob. But he had someone who could. Thornton reached over and depressed the button that would bring the house-robot clanking up the stairs, and waited.

The robot appeared a few minutes later.

"Yes, sir?" it grated ponderously.

"Go outside," Thornton ordered. Quickly he outlined what he wanted done, and the

robot nodded its acknowledgment gravely and moved out.

As the metal servant left, Nina entered. "What's happening?" she asked.

"I'm setting a trap for a rat," he said. "Now I've got to get some cheese."

He opened the closet and began fumbling in the supply cabinet.

"What are you looking for, dear?"

"Sodium amytal," Thornton said. "Truth serum. I just sent the robot downstairs to catch one of those androids and bring him back up here. We'll get to the heart of the matter soon enough."

Thornton hoped he sounded confident enough; inwardly he was worried, but he didn't want Nina to know that. He began preparing the solution for injection when the captive android appeared.

Outside, there was the sound of loud thumping, as if of shovels clanging off the robot's impervious metal skin, and then an outraged roar went up from the crowd of androids. Thornton heard the door slam, and the loud pounding of the robot's treads on the stairs.

A minute later the robot entered, pushing before it a captured android. The syn-

thetic men all looked roughly alike, and so Thornton had no way of telling, but it seemed to him that the one the robot had grabbed was the one who had originally threatened him in the field. The robot had one metal claw wrapped firmly around each of the android's arms.

The struggling android glared defiantly at Thornton. "Tell your tin man to let go of me, boss-man!"

"I'll give the orders," Thornton said. "Hold still." He lifted the hypodermic and brought it over to the android.

"What are you going to do?"

Thornton said nothing, but slid the needle effortlessly into the smooth flesh until he reached a vein. He released the contents of the hypodermic into the android's artificial bloodstream, and withdrew the needle. The android's self-sealing flesh immediately closed over.

"You can let go of him now," Thornton said, and the robot released its prisoner. The android rocked unsteadily for a moment, then took a seat. Thornton stood over him.

He glared down. "Why did you rebel?" he asked sharply.

"The man . . . told us to,"

the android said, obviously unwilling but unable to control itself. "He said it would be better not to work."

"What man?"

"The tall one . . . Ledyard. He came to us last week, and talked to us."

Ledyard! It rang a bell, all right. Simon Ledyard was the son of one of the biggest robot manufacturers; he had inherited the factory the year before, and had fought the development of androids bitterly.

"What did he tell you?"

"He . . . said we didn't need to work. And he gave us something to drink, and we felt free. We didn't want to work any more, the way we had before."

Thornton frowned. So Ledyard was here, and had drugged the androids? "Where is this man now?"

The android made an apparent effort to hold back the information, but the drug proved too much to withstand. "He is . . . among us. Wearing our clothing. Looking like us."

Ledyard was disguised as an android? Here, plying his job of corrupting the androids, hoping to sway Thornton's judgment when he made out his deciding report? Thornton frowned; Ledyard's

plan was going to backfire, if *he* had anything to do about it!

Thornton was angry, now. He had come here as a detached, impartial observer. But the devil with that, now; the androids downstairs had been stirred up to riot peak (he heard their wild roaring drifting upstairs) and Ledyard's wily scheming had put Thornton and Nina in deadly danger.

Suddenly Thornton realized the full magnitude of the plot. Ledyard wasn't concerned merely with influencing Thornton's decision. Oh, no—he wanted the androids to *kill* the observer, to show to the watching galaxy that they were entirely undependable as labor forces.

Thornton would have to fight his way out. The androids had been conditioned to serve humans. Ledyard had given them some sort of drug to counteract that conditioning.

Thornton glanced over at the white-faced figure of Nina. "Get the microscope set up," he told her. "I'm going to make a chemical examination of this android's blood."

Fifteen minutes later, he knew. It was a hydrocarbon-base drug that broke down

the intricate neural path of the android brains, released their inhibitions, killed their work-drive. It would take about two weeks for the damaged neurons to knit together—and by that time Thornton would have been gone, with his report blasting the androids and recommending that the Cartel stick with the safer robots. Or Thornton would be dead at an android's hand, which would accomplish the same thing infinitely more permanently.

Quickly he explained the situation to Nina.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

"I've got to talk to the androids, convince them that they've been bamboozled by Ledyard."

"They'll kill you if you go down there!"

"I'll address them from the balcony," Thornton said. "I've got to win them back to our sympathies, or else we're finished. Ledyard's out there somewhere in that crowd, and he's probably busy inciting them to burn down the house right now."

"If he does that," Nina said, "and word gets around the galaxy that androids killed humans, it'll finish the android industry forever!"

"That's just what Ledyard

wants." He walked to the window and looked out. The androids were milling dangerously around below. He threw open the big windows and stepped out, ignoring Nina's worried exclamations.

He was greeted by catcalls and a sprinkling of stones from below. They bounced around him, but he managed to duck them all and hold up a hand for silence. He drew his blaster and pointed it at the captive android.

"Quiet! And listen to me—or I'll cook this hostage here."

That only seemed to redouble their fury. Another shower of stones came from below, one of them nipping his shoulder and stunning him for a moment. "You'd do it, too," shouted one of the androids from below.

"Slavedriver!" they yelled. "Murderer!"

That line of approach had failed—and Thornton knew he'd have to get their sympathy in a hurry. He held up his hands again. "Listen to me—if you want to save your own lives!" he roared. "Or do you want to get killed?"

He saw a change of expression on some of the golden faces below, as if they were now curious to hear him out. The appeal to their reason had worked, where the appeal

to their sympathies for their fellow android hadn't.

"You've cut your own throats!" Thornton went on. "You've let this Ledyard come among you and corrupt you—not realizing that as soon as word of this revolt gets around, all of you will be killed and all androids replaced by robots again!"

Suddenly they fell silent, as the impact of Thornton's belated words sank into their chemical-colloid brains. A few malcontents still muttered angrily, but most were quiet. Seizing the moment of silence as an opportunity, Thornton went on.

"You've almost ruined things for yourself. But not quite. You still have a chance to save yourselves from the acid vat—if you'll repudiate Ledyard!"

A few stones came up at that, but Thornton saw curious faces in the crowd, and some of them asked, "How?" *The tide is turning*, Thornton thought, weary from the strain.

"*First*: end your rebellion.

"*Second*: come up here and receive an injection that will counteract the drug Ledyard gave you.

"*Third*: return to work as before."

"And what's in it for us?"

one skeptical android called out.

"In return," Thornton said, "I promise to see to it that androids are manufactured on large scale to replace robots in industry! I will turn in a favorable report."

Behind him he heard Nina's gasp. "How can you?" she asked. "After the way they've rebelled!"

"I know what I'm doing," he whispered. He turned back to the androids below. "You've heard my terms? What do you say?"

They roared their approval loudly.

"What's this injection business?" Nina asked.

"A placebo—a blank," said Thornton. "Pure distilled water, nothing else. It's valuable psychologically; they'll *think* they've been reconditioned, and they'll go back to work willingly."

"How'd you manage to win them over so easily?" she asked.

"Ledyard's drug only releases their inhibitions and deconditions them, but it doesn't make them necessarily rebellious, if it's to their advantage not to rebel. It doesn't destroy their common sense. They know when they're in danger, all right,

and as soon as I showed them what the real score was they gave in. We still can't count Ledyard out, though. I want to catch him and keep him from stirring them up again, now that they're orderly."

There was a knock on the door. Thornton opened it and saw a long line of androids waiting, stretching down the stairs and around out of sight. He gestured to the house-robot.

"Admit them one by one," he said.

The first android came in, closing the door behind it. Thornton dipped his syringe in the bowl of distilled water he had prepared, and with great show injected it into the android's arm. The needle sank in easily, and he withdrew it after the injection.

The android looked up at him. "Thank you, sir. We've been talking, and we're just as anxious to find Ledyard as you are, now. He could have had us all destroyed, if we had listened to him."

"Exactly," said Thornton. "I'm glad you see that. Next android," he said to the robot.

The first android left, and the second took its place. Then the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth. Thornton continued the injections impassively, watching with much inward amuse-

ment Nina's completely puzzled face.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth androids moved through just as quickly. The tenth, though, was somewhat hesitant. Thornton looked up suspiciously as he saw the android slink warily into the room.

He prepared the injection, while the android held up its golden-skinned arm. Then Thornton brought the needle down, and inserted it. He stared at the arm, and reacted instantly.

"Okay, grab him," Thornton commanded the house robot. "There's the phony!"

Immediately the pseudo-android recoiled, and as the big robot moved ponderously toward him, Ledyard darted forward and threw the cutoff switch. *Of course*, Thornton thought angrily. *A robot manufacturer would know exactly how to do that.*

"You're very clever, Thornton," Ledyard said. "I don't know how you saw through the disguise, but you did." He backed away toward the door, moving around the motionless robot.

"You won't get anywhere, Ledyard," Thornton said. A torrent of rage surged through him, and he reached out at the other man. He

heard Nina's scream in the background.

Ledyard's fist came up and caught him in the midsection. Thornton grunted, recovered his breath, and answered with a swift punch to the chest, and Ledyard bounced back.

They circled around in the little room, each looking for an advantage.

Thornton flicked out a tentative fist and struck home, but it didn't bother Ledyard. The robot manufacturer was taller and longer-armed; he was built almost to the specifications of an average android, and achieving the right skin-color must have been a simple matter of dye.

Then they came together in a clinch, and Thornton felt the other man's fists pounding away at his stomach. Dimly, through the haze of pain and anger, he saw Nina move behind them and open the door. *It's just like her to run away,* Thornton thought bitterly. *The girl's soft. I didn't think she was such a weakling when I married her.*

But, to his surprise, Nina wasn't running away. She had simply opened the door, and she was gesturing to Thornton to push Ledyard through it. He caught on.

He parried a blow to the chin and answered with one

just above the heart, and began to push Ledyard toward the open door with a series of short jabs. Ledyard replied to them, but kept retreating.

Then he stopped, braced himself, and began to drive Thornton back. Half-crazed with anger and hatred, Thornton leaped forward and dug his fingers into Ledyard's shoulders. He began to push desperately, forcing the bigger man back, back—

And then, with a mighty shove, he sent Ledyard flying through the door, catapulting into the corridor—straight into the arms of the waiting androids.

"He's all yours!" Thornton cried.

There was a joyous, chilling outcry, followed by a single awful scream.

And then all was silent.

Thornton looked up at the cultured, plump face of Ed Chesley, the local Supervisor, two days later.

"They're all back on the job now, Ed. I had some of them bury Ledyard, but they weren't anxious to do it. God, how they hated him once I was able to show them they were cutting their own throats by listening to him!"

"It was a messy way to die," Chesley said. "I suppose

it's my fault for having left, but it would have happened anyway. Ledyard was a no-good rabble-rouser; I don't imagine there'll be any repercussions when this gets out."

The Supervisor walked up and down, examining the damage that had been done to his house in the melee during his absence. He turned to Thornton.

"It's ironic, Dave—that despite Ledyard's grisly end, he achieved what he set out to do. I imagine you'll have to recommend continuing use of robots anyway now; they're not as efficient as androids, but they can't be tampered with and so they're much safer."

Thornton shook his head, grinning. "Dead wrong. I promised the androids I'd recommend them for general use, and I'm keeping that promise."

"But how can you?" Nina and Chesley said almost at once, in evident bewilderment.

"The androids can be modified so they won't be susceptible to the drug Ledyard used, and then they'll be perfectly safe. But more important, if we educate our

androids properly, they'll know it's for their own good to keep serving us, or else they'll be replaced with robots again. They'll understand; they reason almost as well as humans, and robots can't think at all."

Chesley nodded. "Sounds convincing to me. But the robotics men won't like it."

"Too bad," Thornton said. "But robots are obsolete, as of now. They'll just have to face that harsh reality."

"Just one thing that's puzzling me," Nina said.

Thornton turned to face his wife. He was looking at her with new respect in his eyes, because she had grown up in that moment of struggle. She had known what would happen to Ledyard if she opened the door, and yet she had done it anyway, since it was the only thing to do.

"What's that, Nina?"

"How did you know that the tenth android was really Ledyard?"

Thornton smiled. "Simplicity itself, my dear Mrs. Thornton. When I stuck that needle in his arm, a tiny drop-let of blood appeared. *Androids don't bleed.*"

THE END



MAN FROM A DISTANT ? ? ? PLANET



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BY THE READERS

Dear Mr. Browne:

I have been reading science-fiction for more years than I care to remember, and I have a large collection of S-F and F pulps that I would like to dispose of. That's one of the reasons that I am writing to you.

If there are any of your readers who would want to buy back issues of s-f pulps, I wish that they would write to me and tell me which issues they want of a particular magazine(s). I have hundreds of back numbers and as I have said before, I want to get rid of them. If there are any of you readers who want some of these, mail your request to me. The cost of the magazines is 25¢.

And the second thing that I want to talk about is FANTASTIC. One of the best of its kind today, and from the old issues of the magazine that I have, one of the best of its day. I picked up the third issue of FANTASTIC ever published (it cost me \$1.25). Truly a treat. I especially enjoyed the fantasy by Mickey Spillane. How about more stories in that general category?

Ron Haydock
4212 Oak Ave.
Brookfield, Ill.

• *It's interesting to hear that the Mickey Spillane issue of Fantastic has become a collector's item. When the issue hit the stands, an expert in such matters predicted the price of*

the issue would eventually reach five dollars. We wonder how old it will be when it hits the five buck figure.—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I've just finished reading the June issue of FANTASTIC science-fiction, and was never more pleased by the contents of a book, as I have been with your publication.

I've been an ardent science-fiction fan for a number of years now, and I fully intend to remain so, as long as you continue to publish the same type of interesting stories as you have in the past.

In this issue I particularly like "Dream Girl" by Robert Silverberg. Mostly, because I envied the character in the story, who had the X-ray glasses. He should be so lucky!

I'm looking forward to seeing the new Anniversary issue of AMAZING STORIES, and hope to find my old favorite among the stories. A story by Edmond Hamilton entitled "The Star of Life," truly one of the great classics in science-fiction.

I haven't seen any of Edmond Hamilton's stories for two or three years now. Do you know if he has retired from the field of science-fiction? I would really like to know what has become of Hamilton, so I hope to read the answer in one of your issues.

All the best in the years to come from a devoted science-fiction fan.

Andrew E. McCall
1 Bull'l Lane
Hamilton, Ont.
Canada

• By this time you've no doubt gotten your copy of the Amazing Stories Anniversary Issue, Mr. McCall. We are sorry that your favorite Edmond Hamilton story was not included. However we're sure you'll understand the production problems that faced us when we came to grips with such an ambitious project as a thirty-year "digest." Two hundred and sixty pages was as far as it was practical to go, pagewise, and thirty years is a long time. We could not even begin to include all the classic yarns that appeared in Amazing over that period. Also, some of the greatest were excluded for other

reasons—copyright difficulties, length, etc. Then too, editorial judgment had to play a large part in the selection and we are frank to admit that many fans have their own ideas of what was really the best—ideas that were just as good, and possibly better, than ours. But a title list arrived at through the democratic process of the ballot was too cumbersome to consider. So, to sum up, we did our very best. Fortunately we included one of Edmond Hamilton's stories—"Wacky World," which we hope you will enjoy in lieu of "The Star of Life."—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I have little to say about story matter. This is a matter of policy and I usually enjoy what I read in your magazines.

I would like to mention cartoons. I have noticed science-fiction cartoons popping up all over the place recently and have even found a few in newspapers which far surpass anything I have seen in the field. I find this deplorable and would like to see you do something to correct it.

And now for the reason I'm writing this letter. I haven't noticed anyone aptly stating the problem of covers. I don't believe that a cover story is at all essential. I also would like it very much if I saw the last of the cover BEM's and the dashing of maidens against the rocks. If I stop at a coffee shop to read, I don't want to have to hide the cover. As for matching an illustration to a story, you have to match more than a single incident or you don't have a good illustration. I might ask what the cover of the April issue had to do with the story. I would like to see good, unsensational, unrelated, artistic covers. I still remember a little man, done in oil, shuddering in a corner and I wish he would return!

The field of science-fiction has had a fantastic rise. It is now descending. I plead with you. Do something constructive!!!

Evan S. Grenfell
Oakland, Calif.

• *Covers present quite a problem to ye harried editor. Some readers like BEMS. Some don't. Some enjoy luscious blondes, brunettes and redheads. Many want a story of which the cover is an illustration. Others can see no sense in a connec-*

tion between the two. We just have to weigh all the various preferences and come as close as we can to pleasing the majority. That gets real rough, sometimes!—ED.

Dear Editor:

Being a comparative rookie to s-f I think I might have a fresh outlook. I have a few opinions I would like you to know, that is if you want to hear from young s-f fans. I am only 15, but I enjoy your magazine regularly.

I considered "Conception: Zero" nicely written and also "Dream Girl," "All Good Men" and "Round Trip." But what I didn't understand was how Lola of "Everybody's Watching You" could have known about Lonnie's parallel world when no one else on her own world did? Perhaps Mr. Thames could say.

I wish to compliment you on your good work. I hope you don't just buy big name stories from famous writers, but keep on introducing new ones as I hope to write science-fiction sometime myself. I would appreciate hearing from your readers.

Dan Farmiloe
Box 12, Long Point Lodge
Elk Lake, Ontario
Canada

• *First off, Dan, you'll find no discrimination here. We like letters from young fans, old fans, middle-aged fans—all kinds are welcome here. We posed your question about Lola to Mr. Thames and he left muttering to himself about "young inquisitive fans" or something along those lines. We'll bring the subject up again later. We have a pretty fair record of introducing new names and this list will continue to expand as long as new writers keep on sending in good stories.—ED.*

Dear Howard:

As I look over your April FANTASTIC, I think I should comment on it. The cover story, by Pollard, was enjoyable; although I have read the plot several dozen times.

"The Hero," by Lesser, was the best in the book, in my opinion. The next story, by Jarvis, was a long dull piece of material. It was good though, but should have been shortened

in order to get in another short story. "The House of Toys," by Stanley, well . . . ?

By the way, can you remember how many stories apiece did R. B. Williams write of Jongor, and Dr. Destiny. Guess that's all, be back next issue.

Don Kent
308 Bark Street
Little River, Mont.

• *The E. K. Jarvis story you mention was radically received in that the fans who liked it thought it was monumental and demanded more stories in that vein. But those who didn't like it were as definitely pointed in the other direction. No one considered it as being "so-so." Robert M. Williams wrote the Jongor and Dr. Destiny yarns. We do not know the proportions involved, but Mr. Williams now lives in Phoenix, Arizona—Route 2, Box 1309. He would no doubt be able to answer your question.—ED.*

Dear Howard:

I've written you very few letters, and those few have dealt



with the "Old Aristocrat," **AMAZING STORIES**. When I subscribed to your magazines a few months ago, the main reason I also included the modern version of **FANTASTIC**, was to fill in the month that **AMAZING** didn't appear. But this April issue of **FANTASTIC** has really come into its own, and doesn't have to take a back seat to any magazine.

The cover this issue by Valigursky was good, as usual for Ed these days, and even illustrated a scene from the lead story! The editorial by Fairman, although not exactly the sort of thing you'd expect to read in a magazine of this type, was interesting and for the most part reflected my own views of the city when I visited there a couple of years ago. I lived nearby as a matter of fact—thanks to Uncle Sam's free housing at neighboring Ft. Monmouth.

The lead story by Pollard should get very good results, letter-wise from the fans. "We wouldn't *dare* run serials in **FANTASTIC** while it's on a bi-monthly schedule . . ." Oh, no, Howard, you wouldn't dream of doing that—Not when you can run a darn good story like "Monarch of Mars" and leave it hanging on page 52, while you evilly chuckle to yourself and

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joyfully rub your blue-penciled fingers together in anticipation of all the letters that will come pouring in: "Please, H B, run the rest of the story (Sequel if you prefer) as soon as you can!" Well, I'm too dignified to beg! I've been reading your magazines for a long time now, and if you think that I'm . . . If you think . . . If . . . PLEASE, HB, FINISH IT!

Milt Lesser's "The Hero" was good as was Stanley's "House of Toys." The best of the other shorts was "The Rough Rock Road," however, and it was in the old FANTASTIC tradition of years ago.

All in all, a very good issue, and if FANTASTIC can keep up to the April par, it will be just as eagerly sought by me as AMAZING in my mailbox. Incidentally, giving any idea of going back to larger size in pulp or slick format? I see that the old master, Ray Palmer, has gone back to it in his magazine, OTHER WORLDS, and it looks very nice.

Thanks from a steady fan and lately letter-hack.

Herbert E. Beach

210 West Paquin

Waterville, Minnesota

• *Pollard, who is a very diabolical fellow, is licking his chops and gloating like an old-time villain over your yearning for more of "Monarch of Mars," believe us! There is a standard motto used by the vaudeville comedians. It goes: "Always leave 'em laughing." Fiction writers have a like ambition synonymous with their own medium. It runs: "If they ask for a sequel you've entertained them." That's the goal all writers shoot for. Maybe Pollard will do a sequel to "Monarch." He's hunting for a plot right now.—ED.*

Dear Editor:

Science Fiction has now been incorporated! On February 23, 1956, a Certificate of Incorporation was filed with the Secretary of State of New York for "World Science Fiction Society, Inc." The first named directors are: George Nims Raybin, Art Saha and David A. Kyle. This membership corporation will be the sponsoring organization of the annual World Science Fiction Conventions.

Interested Fans should send \$2.00 to the World Science Fiction Society, Inc., P.O. Box 272, Radio City Station, New

York 19, N. Y. for membership for the 14th World Science Fiction Convention to be held on Aug. 31 - Sept. 3, 1956.

By sending this membership fee in promptly, fans can help make the forthcoming convention a success and help further the best interests of fandom in general.

Dear Editor:

I just finished the April issue of FANTASTIC. As a whole the magazine was good. There is only one story I find any fault with. That is "The Monarch of Mars," by John Pollard. I realize he was trying to wring just one more story from a theme so old it's just about used up. Mr. Pollard was doing quite nicely until the "gorts" (how trite can you get!) attacked the "gants." Then, he dropped the whole thing! The ending he attached to that story is the worst I've seen in many a year. If he didn't have a good ending in mind why, in heaven's name, did he bother with the beginning (which was good!) and the middle?!?

After reading the above mentioned story the temptation to throw the whole magazine in the trash can was very strong! However, I'm glad I read on. "The Hero" and "The Rough Rock Road" were excellent stories! I hope to hear more from Milton Lesser and E. K. Jarvis. If you can keep your stories on the level of the last ones I mentioned you can be assured of my 35¢.

A/lc Kennth C. Cable, Jr.
59th Weather Recon. Flt.
APO 856, New York, N. Y.

• *We gather, Mr. Cable, that you would not particularly care for a sequel to "The Monarch of Mars." Maybe Mr. Pollard will have to do a limit-edition sequel for Mr. Beach whose comments on the same story (see his letter in this department) was ecstatic.—ED.*

Dear Editor:

I must be a poor man, indeed, Mr. Browne, for my deep-space heart is never warmed by words such as "mag," "gripe," and other such choice bits of verbal tripe. However, congratulations are in order for your column, your editing must have been excellent or your readers' taste improved.

This, my first, will be a rather lengthy one, so I give you full permission to print what you will and leave out what doesn't please.

According to my friends, I am slightly more than fanatic about science-fiction, be it pure scientific, as is friend R. Heinlein's forte, or merely Black Magic and sulphur fumes, so beautifully blended in F&SF. Suffice it to say that I have been an avid reader in the field since *The Puppet Masters* made a bigger hit on the Yale campus than Smith College's ever so famous "Mountain-Day."

Mentioning TPM brings me to my first complaint: namely, serialized stories. Personally, I haven't bought a single s-f publication with a serial in it since that first one. Why? To those who desire a long session of reading I say, "Go out and buy a book-length novel . . . but don't clutter up a magazine devoted to short-stories with a story good enough to print, but not good enough to put all in one issue! If a story is a good one then it's too good to put down and try to pick up the strings a month or two later and a resume is a sad excuse for the whole story. That sort of inhumane treatment is nothing



"Our insurance covers everything—I think."

short of editorial infanticide . . . ahhh, such a young magazine to die so ingloriously.

An orchid to E. K. Jarvis for his inspiring, quasi-religious "The Rough Rock Road." Except for the last two pages, admittedly weak, it was the best of a fine group of stories. I must admit, though, after that line about . . . you certainly laid it on the line . . . I had to recheck the author's name to see if Jack Webb was writing science-fiction . . .

A bit of advice before you hit too disastrously the pitfalls found by your "digest-sized" predecessors . . . make the cover as attractive or as ugly as you wish, I'm buying good reading, not pictures in gaudy colors, or for that matter, interior artworks either. Good money spent on bad illustrations may have been more advantageously spent in acquiring better material from authors. Frankly, I'd rather have the 1,000 words than the one picture.

A right fine letter from H. Sachs, I thought. If he remembers the 3rd CAV. as well as I suspect, then perhaps he'll drop



"Old Cranshaw always was a great one for a joke!"

me a line . . . had no idea there was a fellow s-f fan so close by in the North Carolina maneuvers.

Do your best, Mr. Browne . . . continue the variety and high quality . . . and I'm sure your lot will be a bed of roses and not thorns.

Walton H. Griffith, Jr.
44 Park Ave.
Newton, N. J.

• *We have always, in editing Fantastic kept the fact in mind that the story comes first. But we feel, also, that good stories presented in a dull, unimaginative package does justice neither to the fiction nor—more important—to our readers. We get a good many letters criticizing and complimenting us on the covers, the interior illustrations, and even the introductory briefs leading into the stories. We try at all times to keep every facet of Fantastic at the highest possible level of excellence.—ED.*

Dear Editor:

I was told there is a science-fiction group in Washington, D. C., but I have tried in vain for months to learn the name and address. Being very interested in finding fellow enthusiasts I hope a resident of D. C. will see this letter and will then give me a clue as to where this club is.

Alice M. Dooley
739 Newton Place, N.W.
Washington 10, D. C.

• *We have no information on this group so are unable to help you. But if they exist, their members no doubt read Fantastic and we're willing to bet they'll be ringing your bell as soon as this issue hits the newsstands.—ED.*

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exactly what I think of him. Sure you have. You were day-dreaming and it probably did you good. It was a method of letting off steam.

Did you ever wish you had a million dollars? Certainly you did and no doubt went a little further. You probably killed a little time figuring out exactly what you would do with it.

Perhaps there are psychiatrists who frown on what they might call a negative practice. We are not learned in the Freudian aspects of the matter we can't "view with much alarm." Day-dreaming is certainly an inherent phase of imagination and from what other source has sprung the first images of the automobile, miracle drugs, airplanes, and the unnumbered miracles we live by? Edison, Ford, Leonardo da Vinci, Watt, Whitney, and Fulton were all day-dreamers of the broadest stripe. Can anyone say they wasted their time? We think not.

So let's give day dreams their due in the scheme of our living. Reality gets pretty grim at times. Dream of telling the boss off. Dream of having a million dollars. And someday it may all come true.—PWF



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